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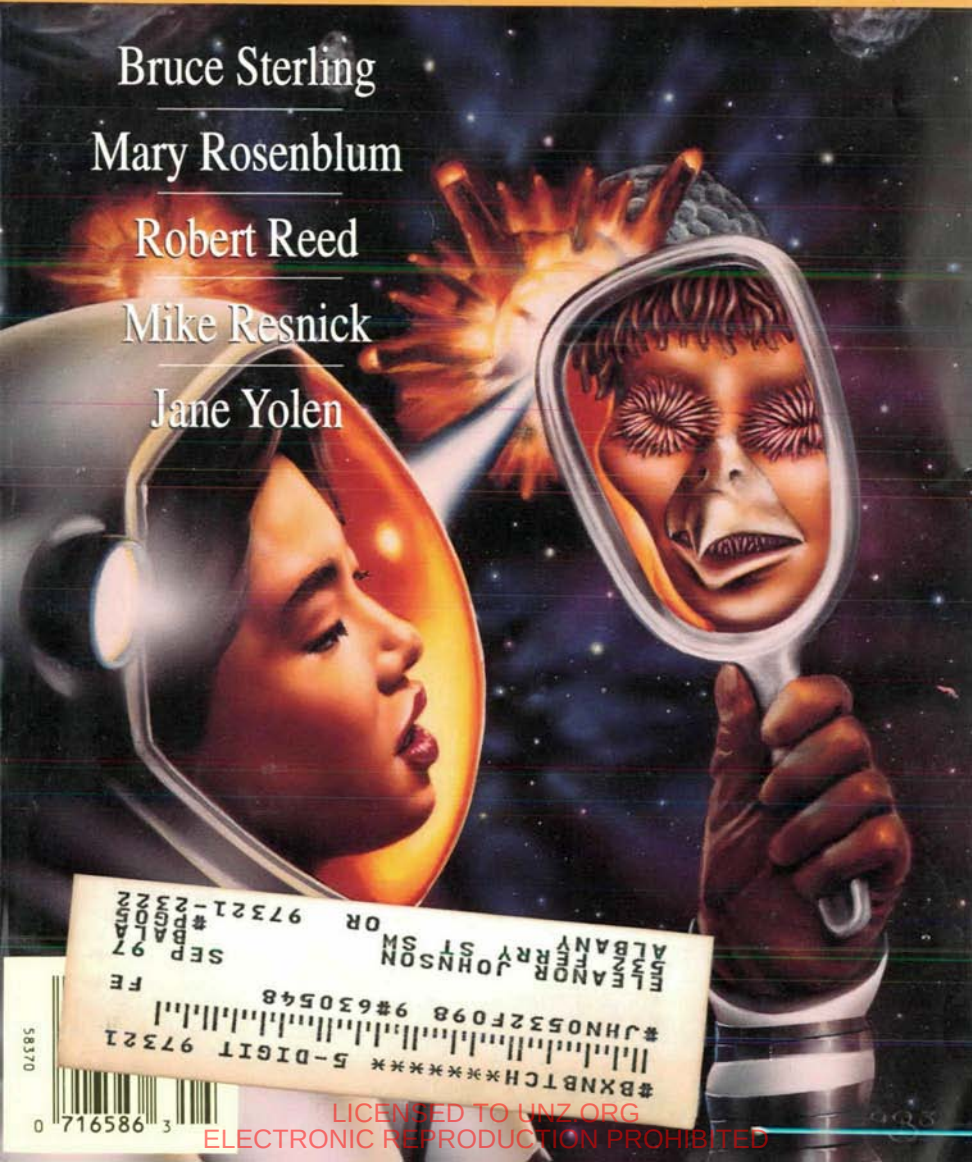

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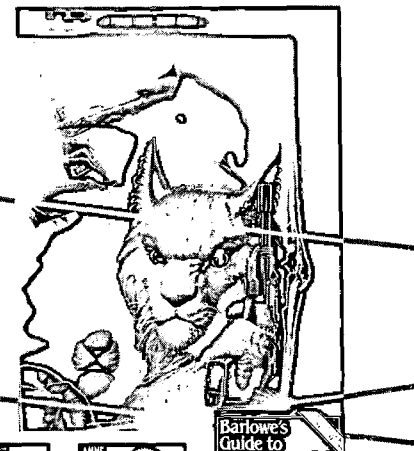

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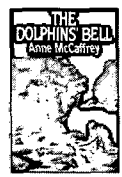

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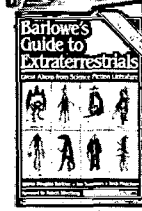

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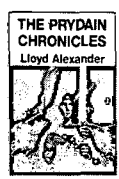

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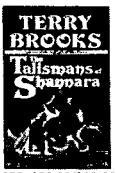

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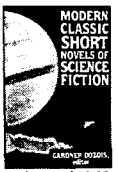

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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 0024-984X), Volume 86, No. 5, Whole No. 516, May 1994. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.75 per copy. Annual subscription $26.00; $31.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Publication office, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Second class postage paid at West Cornwall, CT 06796, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1994 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I WRITE THIS on January 9, 1994, as I wrap up the last few details of 1993. By the time you read this, you will be thinking of income taxes and spring flowers. Even though this editorial should have been published in our January issue along with other thoughts of the new year, I couldn't write it then. I had to wait until 1993 really ended so that I could analyze the entire year, its peaks and valleys clearly behind me.

Last year I had a conversation about reading habits. I tend to read a lot, and not just for *F&SF*. In the summer I carry a purse large enough to hold a paperback. In the winter I keep one book in the pocket of my winter coat. I also have a book stashed in the car and several around the house. I dip into every magazine that comes across the threshold although I rarely read any of them cover to cover. I read whenever I have a spare moment — some times only a paragraph or two. The Rod Serling *Twilight Zone* episode in which Burgess Meredith is the only person alive at the end of the world and breaks his glasses on the way into the library is, in my opinion, a depiction of the ultimate horror.

Even though I know *how* I read, I realized after that conversation that I never kept track of *what* I read. I decided to keep a list for the duration of 1993 to see what kinds of books I read on a consistent basis.

To make the list, I had to simplify. I limited it only to books finished. To keep track of all the magazines, all the short stories, all the newspapers, all the half-completed books, would be ludicrous (not to mention horribly time-consuming. Just this afternoon, I read a *People Magazine*, four articles in the current *Atlantic Monthly*, and three newsletters for various organizations I belong to. I will, when I finish this editorial, read about twenty short stories submitted to the magazine, and (I hope) find time to finish the novel I started reading yesterday).

What I discovered is this: I finished twenty-six books which equals a book every two weeks. Of the twenty-six, I thought only six were

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Ian R. MacLeod has been called the first important new writer of the 1990s. His short fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Pulphouse, *and* Interzone, *among many other places. He has a novel making the rounds, and his first short story collection will appear from Arkham House sometime next year.*

"Sealight" came out of his love for Venice and his desire to play with some of the elements of heroic fantasy. "I always envy the way your average hero seems to be able to set off on his quest without arranging to have his mail redirected, his dog fed or his rent paid," he writes. "It strikes me that in real life, even in fantasy real life, things are very different."

Sealight

By Ian R. MacLeod

"YOU WILL BE CAREFUL, dear?"

"Of course I'll be careful." Ran Kirving carried his mother from her bed to the wicker wheelchair, smoothing the blankets over the remains of her legs.

"Tomorrow's a big day, son. The happiest day of your life."

"Yes, Mother." He kissed her temple.

"So you will be careful, won't you?"

Ran smiled and patted her hand. Then he picked up the bag of skidling sandwiches she'd made him the night before. "See you this evening."

He took the stairs of the creaky tenement three at a time, past the screams of babies, the slow rumble of household arguments that would last into the night, the cabbagestalk reek of too many lives pressed too close together.

The courtyard was filled with flapping washing and sunlight. Ran paused to take a breath of the relatively fresh air. As always, it was flavored

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with rotting seaweed and stagnant canal.

"What a lovely morning!" a voice called.

Ran looked up and saw Piir leaning from the creaky balcony of her parents' tenement. She was still in her nightgown, her red hair tied back from her wide and innocent face.

"Yes," Ran said, squinting at her through the fluttering sheets, telling himself over and over again how lucky he was to be marrying her, hoping that with enough repetition he might come to believe it.

"I've just got the hem of my dress to finish," Piir said. She laughed. "Think of me, all in white." She turned slightly and the flashing sunlight caught the rounded shape of her figure, the curve of her belly that people were already starting to notice.

"I've got to go," Ran said with a wave.

Piir waved back. "You will be careful, won't you?"

It was a fine day for fishing. The wind had veered away from the dimly foul stench of the marshes and Ran's sail snapped taut in the breeze. The sea was flat blue and almost waveless. Even the ancient hull of Ran's boat had decided not to leak for a change.

Ribald shouts rang across the little flotilla. Ran's fellow fishermen knew that he was getting married tomorrow, and were full of advice as to his wedding night. Ran made the appropriate gestures to them, knowing that they would be unable to tell whether he was actually smiling.

The wind hurried them down through the main channel toward the lagoon. The seagulls circled and cried. Spires and cupolas flashed bronze and drifted to leeward.

Off to the east, the last island of the city soared darkly from weedblack rocks. As he had done each morning since his childhood, Ran gazed toward it. This was where the palace of Torea raised the dark shoulders of its impenetrable seaward face, shrugging off storm and time. He had learned of its legend, which is also the legend of Lady Jolenta, from his long-dead father as he sat at the prow of this same little boat. How Jolenta had been cursed with ageless beauty five centuries before, and how it was said that she still lived somewhere beyond those ragged battlements. Every few decades, some nobleman would tire of writing turgid poetry in her honor and vow to release her, make her his lover, even his wife. But the stories always ended there. The

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abandoned Eastern Quarter of the city was a dangerous place at the best of times, where ghosts darted in the dark canals and the ruined houses held secrets best left undiscovered; those who tried to penetrate the walls of Torea were invariably never heard of again.

What Lady Jolenta needed, Ran had decided long ago, was an adventurer, a hero from the dazzling pages of the books Ran lacked the talent to read. Some giant built with shoulders like a milk yoke, golden hair and flashing blue eyes, a magic sword and a dark secret. Ran gazed up at Torea's massive central tower, topped by a widening profusion of roofs, weathervanes and turrets like a warted mushroom. Sometimes, when he returned weary from a day hauling the nets and stared up at it through the grainy evening, he thought he glimpsed a light flickering from the highest window. But tomorrow he was to be married, and the sun was already bright enough to douse a thousand lanterns. It seemed that there was no room left in his life for such mysteries.

Ran hawked up a gob of spit, lobbed it an admirable distance. He swung the boom toward the wind and cut through the water, leaving the little flotilla behind. Partly, he wanted to spend his last day of bachelorhood alone, but also the further west he sailed along the coast, the bigger his catch of skidling was likely to be. Mostly, the fishermen in their fragile boats preferred to keep together and net the thinner shoals in the middle flats of the lagoon rather than risk going near the marches. Even the surrounding waters were places of uncertain danger, tied to the past by a gray pall of nightmare legends. But Ran's boat was close to the end of its life. His grandfather had bought it thirdhand many years ago. Now, the boards were split and the sail was more patch than canvas. Within the next year or two, and if a storm didn't catch him before, Ran would need a new boat. With his mother to support — and now Piir and the child that was forming in her belly — it was imperative that he find the money.

The keel creaked and the ominous coastline grew nearer as Ran day-dreamed of heroes and quests. Green scum veined the water. Islands of slick black sand slumped to the horizon, tufted biliously green in patches. The catches were abundant here — the water was like soup and the fish thrived — but so were the risks, not least of which was grounding the keel on some hidden mudflat. The sail sagged in the still air. Ran unstowed the oar and swept it slowly to each side, canoe-fashion. The wooden blade made a

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sucking sound. Otherwise there was silence.

Ran glanced down over the side of the boat, praying for the continuance of open water, wishing, too, that he did not have to fish here. He jumped as water erupted close to his elbow, but it was no more than a bubble of marshgas, foul-smelling but harmless. The disturbance caused a shoal of skidling to scatter through the silt like spilled coins. He nodded to himself and leaned forward to stow the oar. This was as good a place as any. He unfurled the nets.

The dark air was hot. He sweated as he worked, drawing the nets through the sleek water. Gutting the skidling, feeling the bright shudder as each life spilled in a gathering slick, he pictured Jolenta, alone in her tower. He saw the fall of her hair against pale shoulders, the gleam and shift of silk across her limbs, a sea-diamond glinting in the soft valley between her breasts.... He shook his head and squeezed a skidling eyeball between finger and thumb until it popped.

Noon came. Time for Ran to eat the skidling sandwiches his mother had made for him. Off to the west, he had noticed a stony gray island that seemed more substantial than the rest. Welcoming the prospect of resting on solid ground for half an hour, Ran eased his boat through the maze of channels. He threw a grappling iron across the last few feet. It struck the gray surface of the island with an oddly liquid *smack*. He hauled himself in.

Ran had half his mind on the grim horizon, watching the glint of distant marshlight. If he hadn't been doing so, he might have noticed the gray-green coils that began to seethe beneath the boat a vital moment earlier. As it was, when he jumped from the prow his feet struck the island with a fleshy slap. His right boot split the surface and black blood puddled up over his ankle, but by then it was too late. The water was starting to boil with angry, seeking flesh.

Tentacles writhed dripping from the water. A rough grayish lump that Ran had assumed to be a rock set in the middle of the island split open to reveal a malevolent yellow eye. A tentacle swung around his arm like a wet rope. Others smacked across his waist, his neck. The muscular flesh bulged, then relaxed, holding without crushing. It lifted Ran lightly toward its steaming maw. Ran screamed and struggled, but the creature's strength was enormous. And he was no hero — he could think of nothing he could do that would make any difference to his fate. He thought instead of his mother, he

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thought of Piir, the way she furrowed her brow when she was unhappy, the way she crinkled her eyes when she smiled. The beak and lips dilated to accept his kicking feet, his legs, his thighs.

It would all have been over quickly enough had the creature not been indolent and ancient, used to eating nothing larger than the frogs and snakes and gray things of the marshes. Somehow it couldn't swallow Ran past his hips. He was stuck — the mouth would widen no further. The throat pulsed uselessly, grinding Ran's legs. The creature began to thrash wildly, turning pinkish in anger, then red as it began to choke. The yellow eye watered and blinked. The creature grew desperate. One of the tentacles pulled hard at Ran's right arm. For a moment, he felt as though it might bust from its socket, but the creature's strength was failing. It was choking, dying.

The tentacles fell uselessly into the water. Silt swirled, began to settle. Ran heaved against the collar of flesh that held him. He pushed again, images of a slow death inside the maw of this dead creature playing through his mind. Given the choice, he would rather the thing had consumed him — but then he felt something give. Lubricated by stinking saliva, he hauled himself out.

He picked his way across the bobbing island of flesh, trying to ignore the white parasites that scuttled around his feet. Before he jumped back into the boat, he noticed something glimmering at the corner of his sight. Filled with a weird sense of curiosity, he decided to look.

He expected no more than light on water or a dead fish, but what he found was an oddly shaped knife wedged into the wrinkled flesh where two tentacles joined. The handle terminated in two golden loops. He took it and pulled. The blade winked in his face, seeming to focus what little light penetrated the marsh. He smiled and stuffed it into the belt beneath his sodden jerkin, wondering whether it might finally signify a change in his luck.

IT WAS GROWING dark when Ran's boat drew back into sight of the city. He drifted on the stale evening breeze through the treacherous channels, past salt pans and weed-strung bones of ancient wrecks toward the fishermen's harbor. His body responded to the boat's needs as he stared east. Torea was black with night, but he was sure he could see a filigree of light from one window. Breathing the gathering aroma of the city, he thought of Jolenta, the

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white purity of her flesh. Clean and cool, like sheets of new linen...

Most of the other fishermen were already back at their moorings. They all wanted to know about Ran's plans for the evening, which inn they would be starting the traditional pre-wedding carouse in. Ran plucked a name at random — the Captain's Lash; a suitably lowlife dive. He told them he'd be there at seven bells, and wondered how long they would sit there waiting for him with tumblers of spiked ale before they realized he wasn't going to show.

He made his way home across bobbing walkways, over creaking bridges, through the courtyard and up the final stairway where the same babies were crying, the same arguments rumbling. His mother was sitting up in bed in the smoggily lit parlor; Piir generally came around about midday to see to her. Ran noticed that the flask of cheap nullwine that she used to relieve her pain was almost empty. She must have had a bad day — it was always worse when the weather was close and hot.

Her illness was now progressing toward its later stages. He remembered his father first breaking the news to him many years ago. Him saying, Son, I've got to tell you something that means you're going to have to grow up quicker than your mother and I would wish. Ran didn't really understand then. Something called mermaidosis. But then a kid from across the courtyard showed him a cheap painting of a woman with the lower body of a fish and laughed and said, *that's what's happening to your Mum, stoopid.* Mermaidosis was a virus that took women in youth and slowly turned their legs and belly to fishscale and fin. The lucky majority died when the silvering reached their waist, but it was said that some became fish in the whole.

"Have you had a good day, dear?"

"You know." He shrugged. "Average." What was he supposed to say, some creature choked when it tried to eat me? Now, maybe if he'd battled it to death...

"Looking forward to the wedding tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"Piir's a lovely girl, Ran. She'll make a fine wife..." She gave him a look. "...and mother. Living here with us, we'll be more of a family again. Like long ago when your poor Dad was alive. Come here." She opened her arms.

Ran knelt beside the bed and leaned into the fishy scent of her embrace. He could feel the pressure of the jeweled knife beneath his jerkin where he had pushed it into his belt. When his mother's hands patted close to it, he

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drew back.

Ran fried skidling for them both on the smoky hob. They ate in silence, both wrapped in their own visions of the future. Afterward, he washed himself at the communal tap, changed, refilled his mother's flask of nullwine, settled her blankets and snuffed out the lights. He tiptoed away, thinking she was asleep, but as he reached the door, he heard her mutter, "You will be careful, won't you, dear?"

"You know me," he said. "I'm always careful."

He descended the stairs to the courtyard; looking up, he could see the light of Piir's window through the shaggy curtain. He turned quickly left alongside the canal. Loose gray entrails of mist were forming over the water but the heat of the day remained. Worn paving and crumbling walls gleamed like sweatslick skin.

Ran took a bridge toward the prosperous Middle District. His nostrils were assailed by different mixes of odor with each breath; potpourri from an open window, patchouli from a lady, her skirts discreetly lifted to avoid the mud, the brown reek of a sewer rising up through grating, incense from the open door of a temple, the spice of a hot meats stall. And sweat on sweat. Heat on heat.

No fishermen could afford to live in these middle districts. Ran was very conscious that he didn't belong here — conscious also of the many patrols of the State Police he saw, with their blue uniforms and bronze truncheons, tipping their caps to anyone who looked wealthy, glaring at the poor. Ran was relieved to find that they only glanced neutrally at him. He was wearing his best jerkin and trouser: they weren't new or even first-hand, but they were clean and unpatched, good enough at least to convince the Police that he wasn't a candidate for a night in their tide-flooded cells.

He took one of the many ferries across the Great Canal. Beyond, and even this late in the evening, the tight alleyways of the Jeweler's Quarter were doing a good trade. Ran wandered, gazing through the barred windows at displays of seajade, dwarfen gold, bloodpearl earrings, and necklaces of wyvern teeth. After passing and re-passing several times, he eventually settled on a jeweler away from the main thoroughfare with a display of dusty birthstones and dead insects in the window. The sign above the door said GRIMMIERY AND HALE, ARTICLES FOR THE DISCERNING.

The interior was thick with shadow and the underwater glint of jewels

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beneath glass. A gray-haired man behind the counter raised an eyebrow, then let it drop. "Can I be of...assistance?"

"I want something valued."

"Insurance purposes?"

Ran shrugged. He wasn't sure what insurance was, except that his mother had complained once or twice that they didn't have any. "It's, er, this," he said.

The jeweler extended his fingers. "Let me examine, Sir."

Ran hesitated, then handed it over.

A flicker of distaste passed over the jeweler's face. It dissolved as he examined the knife.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"I'm a fisherman...I mean, a captain. We're very rich. It's been in the family for years."

"Then doubtless you'll know what it is?"

"Well, a knife...dagger, I suppose."

"A knife, dagger." The jeweler chuckled — not a pleasant sound. Then he did something with the knife that — to Ran at least — seemed extraordinary. He looped his long fingers into the twin gold hoops at the top and pulled. The knife was hinged in the middle. It split into the shape of an X; two separate blades. The jeweler closed it again with a *snip*.

"Have you not heard of scissors?"

"I, er...can you remind me, please?"

"Scissors are used by the comfortably off and the well educated to cut their hair. Of course, the poor use a razor..." He gazed at Ran. The eyebrow went up again. "...if they use anything at all. But this pair, I would not like to guess at their intended use, or their value. See the way the blades fit together, so tightly? Yet they slide apart like oil on water if the pressure is applied just so." *Snip*. "The work is finer than the finest smithy in this city could produce. They are dwarfen, I would guess, although you would need the word of an expert to be sure. For all I know, they have some magic cast into them; certainly the level of craftsmanship suggests it. Scissors such as these might be used to cut a lock from the mane of a unicorn..." He gazed absently into the gloom. "...that kind of thing." *Snip*. "So I must repeat my question. Where did a lout like you find them?"

Ran lunged forward. He snatched the scissors from the jeweler's hand,

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narrowly avoiding serious injury to them both. He was out of the shop and off down the maze of alleys before the jeweler had a chance to cry out or raise the alarm. It was only when Ran was catching his breath in the darkness half a mile off that it occurred to him that he really had no reason to run or feel guilty. The only other creature who could possibly claim ownership was the octopus — and that was dead.

So the knife — the *scissors* — might be valuable. If he was lucky, he told himself firmly, they would bring enough for a down payment on a boat...or a new wheelchair for his mother. Or a crib for the baby. He turned the golden blade over in his hands. Dwarfen...magic...unicorns...he couldn't help thinking that these *scissors* were just the kind of thing that a hero might carry...

Ran slid the cold metal back into his belt and glanced around. He saw decrepit high-gabled buildings. He had run further than he realized; their ornate style was characteristic of the ancient Eastern Quarter. Only a few lights glowed from the highest floors or flickered through the gaps in the sag-roofs, and those were pale and cold; as likely a sign of ghosts as habitation.

He picked his way through the litter of moonlight and rubble. He was lost, but he knew where he was going. Tomorrow might be the biggest day of his life, but this last night was his alone. Ran's feet crunched the broken remains of mosaics and stained glass, passed over bridges and through courtyards. This had once been the wealthiest district of the city, where the barge sails were silk and the water sellers sang bel canto. Here, Lady Jolenta would once have walked, drawing all eyes, all dreams, all envy. Hardly anyone lived here now, just the ancient and the insane, muttering over days of past glory. He saw two such creatures fighting over the corpse of a cat washed up in the scum of a canal. Opinions varied as to the reasons for the decline of the Eastern Quarter. Some said it was no more than the drift of fashion and problems with the seadrains. Another version of the story — which Ran preferred not to dwell on tonight — was that creatures had started to ferment spontaneously in the fetid silt.

He came suddenly to a wide canal arched by the bonewhite branches of dead nsia trees. The far end was blocked by a massive wall. Above it, reaching far into the sky, were the roofs and pinnacles of Torea, much closer than he had ever seen them from the lagoon. Unmistakably, a light glinted from the highest tower, although from where he stood it looked as though it was

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coming from somewhere amid the stars.

Ran reached back into the belt, drew out the scissors, held them menacingly before him in his right hand in much the same way as he had seen adventurers depicted in woodcuts. He prowled along the footway. The waters of the canal beside him were flat, catching the night like a dark mirror. The moon shifted through the white branches overhead.

He stopped: the moon still slithered through the branches. The sensation of watching it was odd, like staring from a stationary ferry at a moving deck beyond. Then he realized that the branches were soundlessly rubbing together like greedy hands.

He started to back away. The whole avenue was twisting and swaying now, and in total, unnerving silence, although the white branches looked as though they should clatter like ancient bones. Then something tapped Ran's shoulder. He spun around. A thousand arms opened to embrace him. He lashed out with the scissors, but a twig whipped instantly around his wrist. Feeling their touch on his face, his hands, his body, Ran understood why the branches made no sound. They were soft as flesh.

They picked him up easily. A branch slid across his mouth, searched and parted his lips. He kicked and squirmed as others lowered him toward a gray trunk which had splintered open to form a wet and hungry maw. He tried to scream, but by now the fleshy softness of the wood had circled his tongue. The yawning trunk was filled with pulsing redness — Ran could smell its greed. He was gripped helpless and rigid. So much for magic scissors — it seemed that the fates had decreed that no matter what else happened today Ran was destined to be eaten by something large and many-armed. Some adventurer you are, he thought, haven't even reached the walls of Torea. Then he thought of his mother, and wondered if Piir would ever marry.

Darkness closed over him. Sadness, too, and a kind of relief. He didn't expect to awake.

RAN DREW A slow breath, then another. The third — and the ache in his bruised ribs — was enough to convince him that he was actually alive. He could hear the clash of sea against rock, but the sound was faint, and something about it told that it came from far below. The air was almost cool, brushing lightly against the sweat on his face. It tasted sweet. Like the sound of the

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sea, the green scent of canals was there, but it was distant.

Finally, he risked opening his eyes. Nothing happened; but now he could feel the soft pressure of a blindfold against his lids. Still drowsy, but alarmed, he tried to shift his arms and legs, but he found that he was bound, seated in some kind of high-backed chair.

Softly female laughter made him start.

"So you are awake now, my gallant knight. What is your name?"

Ran opened his mouth. Nothing came out. His tongue was as sore as his ribs from the grip of the nsia trees. He swallowed, tried again. "Ran Kirving, your — your ladyship."

"My *ladyship.*" Again, that laughter. It came from behind him. Something about it gave Ran goosebumps. It was warm, friendly, cold, harsh...fire and ice. "You do me this honor without even seeing me, without knowing who I am."

Ran felt a rush of disappointment. "But aren't you Lady Jolenta?"

"So, after all this time, I am still known of in the city?"

"My father told me...I—I'm just a fisherman. I pass the seawalls of Torea every morning."

"A fisherman. Sometimes I watch your sails from these windows. Do men still write poetry about me?"

"I suppose so."

"Have you written any?"

"No." Ran felt his cheeks flush. "I can't read or write."

"Well, thank God for that, Ran Kirving, for I cannot stand poetry, especially the kind that men write about me." The voice drifted from his back to his left side, then to the front. "Now, will you tell me why you are here?"

Once again, Ran was struck speechless. He had given the details of the matter perilously little thought, but he had imagined that reaching Jolenta would involve many dangers which would be bravely and ingeniously overcome. Beyond that, he had little idea of what would happen, except that it would be likely to involve a strong element of the erotic or — failing that — the romantic. But hearing her voice...all wonder and beauty was there like the swirl of an icy current on a cloudless day. And age too; five centuries of solitude.

She laughed. "You probably expected me to welcome you with open arms." Her voice was close now. Her breath was odorless yet its scent was

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dark and sweet, overpowering.

Ran shivered and nodded; there seemed little else to do but admit the truth.

"You need not feel ashamed — you are no different from the others. The vanity of man changes little with these many years. But still it puzzles me why anyone should assume I seek male company when I have so conspicuously isolated myself from the world."

"Isn't there...some kind of curse?"

"A curse? Oh yes, there is indeed a curse. I am cursed with this beauty that will not age. But the way I choose to live my endless life, that is my own freedom. Every few years, the far-seeing waters of that canal tell me of some new adventurer who seeks to disturb my solitude. Usually, I simply leave the nsia trees to deal with the problem, and I must confess, Ran Kirving, that was my first inclination with you too. But you were obviously of a different breed to the pampered noblemen who usually come this way. And instead of a wand or a knife, you carried a pair of scissors! For that alone, I thought you deserved just a little mercy."

Ran was silent. Her breath, her voice, the slight warmth that came from the close presence of her body, had drifted further away from him again, but still he felt light-headed.

"What did your father tell you about me?"

"That you were beautiful. I was just a child. He's dead now."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ran, even if I envy his release."

"Envy?" Ran heard his own voice with surprise. "How can you say that? You live here in a huge palace...I have to share rooms with the smell of the toilets below and people yelling and the floor creaking...skidling for breakfast, dinner..."

"Yes, of course. And I am glad that I allowed you to enter Torea, Ran Kirving, if only to remind me that suffering is never unique. Desperation must lie somewhere in your heart. If you look at it in one way, I suppose trying to see me is a kind of suicide. Certainly, none have yet survived to tell the tale."

Ran said nothing.

"Did your father tell you nothing more about me?"

"No."

"Well, while there is still some portion of the night remaining, perhaps

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I might help you to understand. It goes back at least as far as the Third Campaign," Lady Jolenta began. "I was born to riches, a merchant family whose wealth began with blood and piracy generations before. It was said that my great-grandfather gained this palace of Torea in a drunken wager over which of two turds floating out from a sewer sluice on the Great Canal would pass under Ridotto Bridge first. Wealth and idleness had corrupted the vigor that sent my forefathers to sea."

Her voice had lost some of its icy calm. She began to pace to and fro. Ran heard the gentle sigh of silk against flesh, the pad of footsteps on stone. "Before I was born, my mother employed an ancient hag who was skilled in the arts that women use to make themselves look comely. The hag was a whispering bag of bones who lived in a hut on the marshflats and survived by scouring the shore drift and seaweed for dead fish and maybe the occasional jewel or relic washed up from some forgotten wreck...hardly an advert for her trade, but then I have heard it said that the best magician is often the least likely one. My mother's hair was dark of course, as is my own, as is the hair of most women in this city probably to this day. But she wanted to be blonde, and the hag gave her a potion. It worked, in a way. It made her hair blonde, but made it all fall out....

"You might smile, Ran Kirving, but you must understand that to a woman of court, this was as the loss of gallantry might be to a knight...or so at least it seemed to my mother. She had the hag convicted under some statue about the Description of Trades. And she came to watch the beheading. Before the axe was raised, the trembling creature saw her sitting amid the nobility in the most expensive seats. With the presence of death at her shoulder the hag also sensed that my mother was with child. She screamed a curse across the heads of the crowd, one of the strangest curses in this city of strange curses. The hag said that my mother would bear the most beautiful child in the Known World.

"It came to pass. I was born beautiful beyond imagining. For his own reasons, my father doubted the tale of the curse. One look in the mirror told him that I was not his child. As I grew, the thought became an agony to him, until he murdered my mother in a fit of rage and then threw himself from this tower. I found half of him next morning on my balcony. He had struck the sharp railings as he fell. The other half lay amid the scattered petals of a rose garden far below.

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"It was the first of many tragedies that were to blight my life. You must realize, Ran, that I was truly young then, that I had the same hopes and fears as any other girl approaching womanhood. But women who thought themselves beautiful despoiled their looks with acid rather than accept the flaws that my face threw at them like a mirror flashing in the sun. Others simply ended their lives. Of course, there were many who wished to kill me, but the attempts always ended in bizarre tragedy. The wet nurse who had been my friend and companion from birth was poisoned by a draft intended for me. Children were drowned on a barge on which I was to have traveled.

"Men, of course, all longed to gain my favors. There were duels and suicides, endless reams of turgid poetry. I longed for companionship, love. But people grew pale and trembled in my presence, and I soon found that those who disguised their feelings and feigned simple friendship were not to be trusted. I began to realize that beauty is power, and that like all power it brings everything but that which you desire. Increasingly, I became a recluse, counting the bright years of youth by the sealight that passed across the inner walls of Torea. Perhaps, I thought, time would finally despoil my beauty and bring me peace. But when I gazed closely into the mirror at the turn of my thirtieth year, I could see no trace of line or wrinkle. And ten more years brought no change. At fifty, when I hadn't ventured from Torea for decades, I finally realized the full power of the water seller's curse on my mother. I would never grow old.

"So I ordered my few remaining servants to spend all the great wealth I had inherited on filling the halls and rooms of Torea with supplies that would last until all the clocks in the Known World stopped beating. Then I sent them away and sealed the windows and doors against all possible intrusion. I paid the best magicians in this city to set traps and golems to guard the ways against any who might be foolhardy enough to intrude. I turned inward to solitude...to this tower, to this room..."

Her footsteps ceased. The faint sound of the waves had changed. Ran guessed that the tide was drawing out, that morning was approaching. The stray thought came to him that this was to have been his wedding day, that even at this moment, Piir would probably be gazing at the light gathering beyond the grubby curtains in the room she shared with her younger brother and sister.

"You mean that you wish to die?" he asked eventually.

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"Yes, if I cannot live some life other than this."

"Could you not simply — "

"Stab myself, throw myself from the window? Do you think I have not tried all of these things? I feel pain, but the healing is instant..."

Her voice quavered. Ran sensed that she was close to tears. He also sensed that she was a little mad — but then in view of the tale she had told it could hardly be otherwise.

She began to pace again. "It is nearly morning, Ran Kirving. I am grateful that you have allowed me to unburden myself...You probably do not realize that I see your face whole. The blindfold you feel on your eyes is no more than a spell."

Ran instinctively tried to reach toward his face. But his hands were still bound — or perhaps that was a spell too.

"I think I will let you go, Ran. But you must prove to me that you wish to live. After all these years, I must admit that I would find the demonstration of such a desire interesting. I will let you go, but first you must agree to my changing the blindfold spell to something stronger. I found it glimmering in a box many decades ago and it seems a pity not to use it. The spell will show you that which you most fear in all this universe and the many, many others. For all I know, it could bring madness. Would you submit to that, were I to let you go free?"

Ran felt his spine freeze inside his back. He tried to picture the drooling horrors he would have to face. One thing seemed certain — from the way things had gone today, they were likely to be hungry and have a great many arms. He forced himself to nod before he had time to dwell further on the matter.

"I wish you luck."

The footsteps drifted away, returned. He heard the creak of a lid, the waft of sandalwood. Then she was close by him. He heard the sound of her lips parting. Her flesh gently brushed his face.

Something slammed into him. It was like being hit by a boom when the wind swung suddenly. Ran braced himself for darkness and horror. He opened his eyes.

The scene was incredibly real. He could hear it smell it taste it. It was no use telling himself that he was in Torea. He was *here.*

The tenement was lit by cheap fish oil candles that smoked and reeked

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of skidling. Or perhaps the smell was coming from the dinner that Piir was cooking on the merge fire. She turned to him and smiled. Her face was blotched, her teeth had gone, she was hugely fat. A baby was screaming in a cot, unconsciously batting a louse that was trying to crawl over the vomity blankets toward its mouth. Beyond the half-open curtains where they slept, his mother was moaning, thrashing her silver tail, shouting, "You will be careful, dear, won't you?"

The scene was horrible, overpowering, real. Yet, somehow, Ran had to laugh — was this really the worst that the universe might offer him? Then he blinked and it was gone.

He blinked again. Morning light was filtering through the great windows of a circular room. Marble, silk, and gold gleamed. Lady Jolenta stood smiling before him.

"I saw too," she said. "You are truly a brave man."

Ran tried to move. His arms were free.

"I think these are yours." She held out the scissors.

"Thank you." Ran took them without shifting his gaze from her eyes. He was no longer bound. He made to stand up, then hesitated. "Can I ask..."

Her look grew fierce. For a moment, he sensed the madness and the darkness of centuries. But he forced himself to speak. "For a lock of your hair."

"My hair...that has never been cut since I was born...yet since you ask, and since you have the scissors."

Ran stood up. Jolenta was fully as tall as he was. His hands were shaking and clumsy, unused to such a delicate job, even if the tool had been familiar. But they were strong from years of hauling nets and gutting skidling. He took a tress of her hair, he put thumb and forefinger through the handle of the scissors. As the jeweler had said, their workmanship was exquisite. The blades moved apart like oil on water.

He cut. There was no *snip*, but an instant of thunderous silence. The brightening morning dimmed. Sparks ran from the blades, shivered the image of Lady Jolenta. She shattered like a broken mirror, flew in a thousand directions as an ancient wind poured through the air. Then something solidified again before him. He looked down at it in pity and horror.

"Ran Kirving." A voice that he half recognized whispered from toothless gray lips. A voice that might once have quivered from the perfect lips of Lady

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Jolenta before they were eroded by age. "Thank you...you have brought me release."

"But..."

A withered claw waved at him. "No, there has been enough talk. You must hurry to your wedding."

The wind blew again, lifting him into darkness. In a moment, he found himself standing at the start of the avenue of the nsia trees with the walls of Torea rising beyond. The trees looked harmless enough in the morning light, but Ran wasn't going to dally long enough to make sure. He broke into a run along the ruined walkways, back toward his home.

The wedding went well as such things are counted. Piir and Ran's mother had been concerned about Ran's absence the night before, but assumed without asking that he had been up to the sort of drunken pranks husbands-to-be generally undertook.

Afterward, Piir moved into their little tenement and her belly grew taut and life went on and the catches of skidling were mostly good, even far from the marshes. Mostly, Ran took the advice his wife and mother offered each morning and was careful. The baby was a sweet thing. They named her Dottie. She had her mother's rare red hair, the same pretty green eyes. There were days when Ran came home tired and Dottie was screaming and Piir was irritable with lack of sleep and from dealing with his mother's increasing pain when he remembered the sour vision that Lady Jolenta had presented him with. But the good came with the bad as it had always done: little triumphs, the play of the sun, the breath of the sea, Piir's laughter and her sense of humor, his mother's joy at Dottie's smile.

Ran's boat still leaked, and sometimes he thought of trying to sell the scissors he kept hidden with a lock of hair inside a niche in the tenement wall. But he could never quite bring himself to do it. And as he finally honored an oft-broken resolution and set about teaching himself to read, he discovered the tale of the Sea Prince Roderick, who had been required to perform nine quests to win the hand of the wild and beautiful Juliana, the Princess Bowskill. The proud Sea Prince had returned from his final quest for a flask containing the breath of a dragon with his features so scalded and ravaged that he was promptly called upon the perform a tenth. The tale then told that he had set out to shear the snakes from the head of a marshharpy armed only

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with a pair of enchanted scissors, and was never heard of again. All of which gave Ran cause to think.

On holy days the Kirving family would sometimes walk the long breakwater beyond the glittering wharves where the waves flashed and the buoybells clanged. Ran would push his mother's wheelchair, and Piir the pram for Dottie that a carpenter cousin had made them. Usually, they would turn back when they got to the stretch of shore that lay at the edge of the city, but sometimes at Ran's insistence they would go farther on to give scraps of food and old clothing to the withered hag who lived in a hut on the marshflats and scoured the shore for whatever the tides might bring. The hag was a mad old creature, but mostly she seemed happy. It was said that others now came this way to seek her wisdom, or simply to gawk at her ugliness. It was said that she had once been a great beauty, a turner of heads, but few except Ran could credit that it was possible for loveliness to lie beneath those ruined features. And he shared his secret with no one.

Walking back along the breakwater toward home one autumn evening, something strange happened. Ran was pushing Dottie's pram, Piir his mother's wheelchair. His thoughts were far away, deep in the half-finished text of a salt-stained book that the old hag had found on the shore and given him. He was reading the book as he rested at anchor each noon in his boat, prising each new page apart to discover the joys of wonder and an escape that he had spent his life yearning for.

The sea along the breakwater was restlessly choppy and the wind was rising from across the lagoon, but still there was no warning and no reason for the great wave that broke over them. Ran and Piir were drenched, and Dottie spat out a mouthful of water and began to cry, but the wheelchair had been overturned, and Ran's mother had fallen from it. Before Ran could help her, she flicked her long fishy tail and began to haul herself hand over hand across the wet stone, leaving the fallen wheelchair and the tumble of blankets behind. There was a frozen moment — filled only with the sea and the crying gulls — then Ran and Piir began to move. But it was already too late. Ran's mother slithered over the edge of the breakwater and plunged into the deep rising ocean beyond.

There was a flash of silver fin, the wave of a hand. In another moment, she was gone.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Dancing Jack, by Laurie J. Marks, DAW, 1993; $4.99.

THERE'S A lot of talk concerning the dearth of good high fantasy these days — a view that's as vehemently denied by the devotees of what one can currently find in the bookstores as it is put forth by the genre's detractors. Unfortunately, I have to side with the latter.

Perhaps I was spoiled. The fantasy I grew up with included Tolkien, naturally enough, but I was also reading William Morris, Lord Dunsany, E.R. Eddison, James Branch Cabell and others of their ilk. While I gained a certain similar sense of enchantment from my reading of each of these disparate writers, what stands out in retrospect is how different they were from each other.

Such isn't really the case these days. Now, granted there are a lot more practitioners currently working than there were when I first began to read fantasy some twenty-five years or so ago, and admittedly most of those I read were long-dead by the time I discovered their work, but that still doesn't completely explain the sameness of so much of today's fantasy. It's not simply the endless trilogies, sequels, and series that proliferate so alarmingly; it's that the books by different authors are so difficult to tell apart. The prose, the characters, the storylines all begin to blend into each other, so much so that I can too often read the first few chapters of a book and readily predict where the author plans to go from there.

The solution, I suppose, is to stop reading secondary world fantasy, but the problem is that I still like it. I just don't want to read something I've read before, albeit in a slightly disguised form, and the few authors I trust to deliver the goods aren't nearly as prolific as I'd like them to be.

All of which is a very long-winded way of getting around to discussing *Dancing Jack* by Laurie J.

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Marks. I've taken up so much column space because we're still getting to know each other and I think it's important for you to know my biases if this column is going to be of any use to you at all in terms of recommending books you might not have already come across on your own.

Marks's novel was handed to me by a friend of mine, a bookseller who also happens to have impeccable taste. That was one point in the author's favor. Also, there was the fact that it was a stand-alone novel. Working against Marks was the knowledge that she'd begun her career with the inevitable trilogy and that when I read the prologue of *Dancing Jack*, the book seemed to be leading into yet another retelling of that same-old, same-old discussed above. But I persevered and was rewarded with one of the most enjoyable secondary world fantasies I've read in a very long time.

Faerd, the world of *Dancing Jack*, is a pleasant amalgam of the Mississippi steamboat era and the more timeless mock-medieval setting one usually finds in a high fantasy. Her characters range from archetypes — dethroned kings, high-handed nobles and the like — to quirky individuals entirely of Marks's own invention: Rhys, the riverboat pilot, torn from her bed on a stormy night to pilot an impossible voyage; Macy, the toymaker, whose toys are more than they seem; and the mysterious Ash of Ashland, haunted by ghosts and the repercussions of past mistakes.

There is a traditional fantasy plotline of the dethroned king attempting to regain his throne that Rhys, Macy and Ash are determined to prevent, but the book itself revolves more around their personal stories and how they must each come to terms with how the past inevitably encroaches upon the present. Those stories move to their own muse and their outcome is impossible to predict without reading through to the end.

More happily, Marks has a real gift for *how* she tells her story. Every page reverberates with a mythic underpinning, lending her characters and their world that air of enchantment I remember from when I was first attracted to fantasy all those years ago. The mood her prose woke in me is similar, but like those earlier practitioners in the field, Marks's voice, and what she has to tell with it, is her own.

Night Relics, by James P. Blaylock, Ace, 1994; $18.95.

It strikes me that Jim Blaylock has somewhat of a love/hate rela-

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tionship with the fantasy genre. Like his occasional collaborator Tim Powers, Blaylock appears to gain his greatest pleasure in setting all the usual conventions on their ear, not to mention the plain silliness that ensues in some of his books. He has shown this time and time again, from his first novel *The Elfin Ship* (1982) through to any of his more recent books such as *The Paper Grail* (1991).

He gets away with it for a number of reasons: He teases, rather than mocks; and for all the tomfoolery, there is invariably a serious story at the core of each book. His characters are often larger than life, almost caricatures at times, yet they remain decent human beings, recognizable in how they mirror aspects of ourselves, our friends, or our neighbors; floundering through their confused world, forever stumbling into trouble for all that they mean well. But the most telling plus is his gift for language.

The words simply seem to flow across the page, unruly at times, but never out of the author's control. Blaylock is a master of detail and invokes his characters and settings with a sure hand. He often concentrates on the elements that the rest of us wouldn't think to notice, thereby adding a dimension to what has already been rendered with a full palette. To see the world through Blaylock's eyes is to see everything, from the most commonplace elements to the fantastical, in a new light.

Which brings us to the book in hand — a Blaylockian take on the traditional ghost story. Set in the author's native Orange County, California, *Night Relics* certainly has all the trappings of a ghost story. It revolves around Peter Travers, who discovers that his ex-wife and son have disappeared in the hills around his cabin. Haunting those hills is the vision of a woman and her child, brought on by the Santa Ana winds that leave confusion and mystery in their wake. As he delves deeper into the appearance of this vision, Travers begins to fear that they are in fact the ghosts of his own family.

That thumbnail outline of the plot only begins to describe the texture of what's going on here. At the heart of the book is an exploration of why marriages succeed or fail, told not only from Travers's viewpoint, on the rebound from one relationship and entering another, but also from the viewpoints of a number of the other characters — including the ghosts. Mixed in with all of that are Blaylock's usual wry observations on the world and some evocative descriptions of the California hill coun-

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try in which the novel is set.

Two things surprised me about this book: That the off-the-wall role usually reserved for Blaylock's protagonists was given to one of the villains this time out, lending all those charming quirks of character a sudden sinister twist. And that throughout the book Blaylock sustained that mood of mystery and fear so necessary for a successful ghost story.

Night Relics is a darker novel than we have come to expect from this author, but the darkness is relieved by light touches and, as always in a Blaylock book, a great deal of heart.

The Good Fairies of New York, by Martin Millar, Fourth Estate, 1992; UK £5.99.

On page thirty-three of the Blackie & Son Ltd. edition of *Flower Fairies of the Wayside* by Cicely M. Barker you'll find a painting of a sow thistle fairy. In the accompanying song the fairy tells us that, "nobody thinks me nice at all...a rogue indeed." With a reputation such as that, it's little wonder that Heather and Morag, the two Scottish thistle fairies who really are trying to live up to the title of Martin Millar's latest novel, feel so put upon.

Of course it doesn't help that they try to turn their kilts into punkish outfits and insist on playing the Ramones on their fiddles. Nor that they're constantly arguing with each other and have been exiled from Scotland for cutting themselves a pair of handkerchiefs from the revered MacLeod Fairy Banner. Nor that they arrive in New York City lost, very drunk, and immediately proceed to get sick on Dinnie MacKintosh's carpet, apologizing with a heartfelt, "Don't worry; fairy vomit is no doubt sweet-smelling to humans," before they pass out. Nor even that their every attempt at a good deed only makes matters worse for themselves, their human hosts and just about anybody else unfortunate enough to be in their vicinity.

I doubt Cicely Barker would have approved, but it's good fun for the rest of us.

The down side of *The Good Fairies of New York* is that there are too many characters for any of them to be more than lightly sketched in and the prose is sometimes a little flat. The plus side is that Millar writes comedy well, ranging from slapstick and clever witticisms to using the occasional bit of black humor to make sociological commentaries.

The novel is full of headlong incident to keep one turning the pages

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and while it might not be a Deep Think book, it's certainly entertaining, more so to anyone familiar with the fairy lore and traditional music of the United Kingdom. One word of warning: it's not a children's book; read (and enjoy) it yourself before you decide whether or not to pass it on to a favorite person of younger years.

Death: The High Cost of Living, by Neil Gaiman & Chris Bachalo, Vertigo/DC Comics, 1993; $19.95.

Through no planning on my part, this column appears to have drifted into a discussion of the current state of fantasy with examples of three of its more predominant sub-genres — high fantasy, contemporary and humorous — already discussed above. And now we have a fourth: Fantasy told in a combination of words and pictures, or to use the common parlance, comics.

Since he first breathed new life into DC Comics's *The Sandman* title, British expatriate Neil Gaiman has ranged far ahead of the pack. His work on the title is literate and timely; rich with mythic resonance and strangeness, yet never so far from the common experience as to be merely exotic; and most importantly — at least in this particular field — the captions and word balloons Gaiman scripts add something new to the illustrations, rather than reiterating what the pictures already show, a failing of too many comic book scripters.

It's difficult to pick his main strength. His characters in this series are all, if not engaging, then certainly fascinating. His plots can be as densely tangled as the work of, say, Gene Wolfe or John Crowley, or carry the simple weight of a fairy tale. His use of magic in a contemporary setting rivals that of prose stylists such as Jonathan Carroll.

For *The Sandman* Gaiman created a family of otherworldly entities known as the Endless. Besides the title character of Dream, the family includes Desire, Despair, Destiny, Delirium, Destruction and Death. The latter, first introduced in issue eight, "The Sound of Her Wings," appears not as a skeleton with dark cloak and scythe, but rather as an attractive young woman with the look of a Gothic punk and a cheerful disposition, as though Gaiman had Jean Cocteau in mind when Cocteau wrote, "We need Death to be a friend. It is best to have a friend as a traveling companion when you have so far to go together."

Spun off into her own mini-series, those three issues now form the collection *Death: The High Cost of*

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Living. In it Death explains to one of her companions, "One day in every century Death takes on mortal flesh, better to comprehend what the lives she takes must feel like, to taste the biter tang of mortality." From that simple statement, Gaiman relates twenty-four hours in the life of a mortal Death, telling a story that is at once universal and personal, exploring not only mortality, but morality, relationships, consensual reality and the importance of Mystery in our lives.

Few prose writers, with hundreds of pages at their beck and call, deal half as effectively with these matters as Gaiman does here, aided and abetted by penciler Chris Bachalo, inker Mark Buckingham and some wonderful paintings by Dave McKean. Completing the package is a short discourse by Death on safe sex, courtesy of Gaiman and McKean, and an introduction by singer/pianist/songwriter Tori ("me and neil'll be hangin' out with the DREAM KING") Amos that's as brief as it is charming.

If you've held off trying one of the Sandman collections because you feel that there's too much already gone on before for you to be able to comfortably step into the series for a visit now, then do try *Death: The High Cost of Living*. Never mind the medium. In this collection, as in his work on *The Sandman*, Gaiman has proved to be one of the best fantasists we have working in the field today.

Suckers, by Anne Billson, Atheneum, 1993; $20.00.

As you might have guessed from its title, Anne Billson's new novel is about vampires. *Suckers* is set in London, England, and frankly Billson does nothing new with our favorite bloodsuckers. It's all crucifixes and garlic, with the vampires set on taking over the world, or at least London for starters. But it's also obvious that Billson had no interest in providing a new take on these creatures of the night when she set out to write *Suckers*. Instead, she's using them as a backdrop against which she's set a wickedly satiric view of high fashion and the publishing industry.

The first-person narrative voice of the self-centered Dora sets the tone immediately, pinpointing what's wrong with everyone around her while remaining blissfully unaware of her own many faults. The voice is perfect for the story Billson has to tell. Dora's running commentaries and quick wit are what make you keep reading, for while I doubt you'll find much sympathy for Dora herself, one can't help but be intrigued with what she has to say. It's

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sort of like listening to Madonna. You might not care in the least about her talents as a performer, but she gives great interview.

I think the most telling moment in *Suckers* comes when Dora comes to understand just how pervasively the creatures have spread through London. "The bar was full of the sort of person I encountered every day in the course of my career," Dora tells us. "Shallow, boring, trivial." When she realizes that they're all vampires, her reaction is, "They'd already been halfway there in life, and they weren't so very different now they were dead — they were still cramming into bars and talking too much. I had always despised such people, but now — thanks to one of nature's malicious little pranks — they would be looking on me as just another nip." Nip being the vampires's slang for humans/food.

For those humans set on fighting the vampire menace, Dora has this advice: "Don't invite anyone into your home. You know about the garlic, and some of you are already wearing crucifixes. Swot up on your Stoker. Watch some Christopher Lee."

Dora, however, has other plans, but you'll have to read *Suckers* to see what they are. The novel manages to balance a fine line between black humor and genuine tension and is a must-read for readers interested in contemporary social mores and vampire aficionados alike.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Multiple Hugo winner Mike Resnick and newcomer Nicholas A. DiChario have collaborated six times in the past year. This is the first of those stories. We will have another in the months ahead.

Mike's most recent novels are Purgatory, Prophet, *and* Inferno. *He has also edited* By Any Other Fame *(DAW) and a highly acclaimed series of alternate history anthologies from TOR. The most recent of those is* Alternate Warriors. *Nick was a 1993 Campbell nominee for Best New Writer as well as a Hugo nominee for his moving short story, "The Winterberry."*

Birdie

By Mike Resnick and Nicholas A. DiChario

I SLEEP. EVENTUALLY THE heavy oak doors of the wine cellar screech open, their iron hinges sprinkling detritus upon my earthen floor.

The slow creak-creak-creak of wary footsteps descend the rotted wooden staircase that has not borne the weight of Man since — hmmm, let me think about this — Robert Darwin? God only knows how many years ago that was, and BOOM! The wine cellar doors collapse again, leaving in their wake a young human boy, standing at the bottom of the cellar steps, trembling in the soft glow of a single flickering candle.

"Is there a dragon down here?" says the lad.

"Anything's possible," I answer.

The child gasps, and I see his white face turn a shade or two paler, and when he finally lets out his breath, out goes the candle. I seem to recall Robert, when he was a lad, making the same blunder — but when Robert blew out his candle he scrambled up the steps and pounded on the wine cellar doors, begging to be freed, screaming like a banshee that the dragon was about

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to devour him alive.

But this one just stands up straight, straining his weak human eyes, eyes that were not made for seeing clearly through the darkness.

"What year is it, lad?"

"The year is 1817," he says. "I thought Father was fibbing. I mean about you. Of course, I can't see you — so you could be fibbing, too. This could all be part of my punishment. Are you a man pretending to be a dragon?"

"Why in the world would I want to do that?"

"Maybe Father is paying you."

"I am not so easily bribed." I flare a nostril, and reveal just enough of my flame to illuminate the corner of the wine cellar where I lie resting.

The youngster edges closer.

"Well, my boy," I said smugly, "do I pass the test? Man or beast?"

"You do look different. Is that green fur?"

"Land scales, actually."

"And that big head with the long nose — "

"Snout."

"And those long floppy — "

"Wings."

"I think your ears are bigger than my whole head," he says, his voice filled with more curiosity than awe. "Do you have four legs or two?"

"Two hind legs. Two front forearms. Fourteen digits in all." I wiggle my fingers and toes.

"Those are awfully small arms," he says. "And awfully big legs. And just look at the size of your toenails!"

"Talons."

"And there's that fire in your nose, too. I don't know of any man who can light a room with his nose."

"Snout." I haul myself up to get a better look at the boy. He doesn't back off, even though I'm as tall as two men and as round as ten. He's a skinny cub, but handsome for his race, nothing at all like the other Darwins I've seen. Erasmus was ugly as sin, and Robert was a fat pig of a child, an awkward, weary specimen with nerves like glass trinkets. The Darwins, historically, have been an absolutely hideous-looking clan. "If it makes you feel any better to believe I'm a man, then I'm a man."

The boy frowns. "You smell different, too. Like...like..."

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"Wine?" I suggest.

"How many years have you been down here?"

"That's a good question." I pause. "Let me think. I was sleeping under a tree, and when I woke up this wine cellar was all around me. I don't remember much before that."

"You mean we built Mount Darwin right on top of you?"

This seems to upset the lad, although for the life of me I can't understand why. I lie down and get comfortable again, resting my chin on the floor.

The boy strides right up to me, sticks his candle in my snout, and lights the wick. He reaches out and touches my land scales. "They don't feel anything at all like fur or fish scales. They feel like...I don't know..."

"Peat moss."

"You can put your fire out now if you like. It must be painful for you to have it burning inside your nose like that." He stares at me. "Do you get headaches? Father gets them badly sometimes. Where do you come from? Do you have any family?"

"My fire is not painful; I don't get headaches; and I don't come from anywhere, nor do I have any family."

"Everybody comes from somewhere."

"Is that so?" I retort. "Says who?"

The lad sits down cross-legged on the hard-packed dirt and holds the candle out in front of him, inspecting me. I shut down my nostril, and a small cloud of smoke wafts in the air between us. A pensive look crosses the cub's face, too serious a look for a young human boy — at least from what I can remember of them. I've come across a few in my lifetime. They always look a little stupid and very frightened in my presence, never pensive. In any event, I am intrigued, as much by the boy as by the fact that I seem to be carrying on a conversation with him.

"What are you doing down here in my wine cellar?" I ask him.

"Father is punishing me for making too much noise in the house. He's always punishing me for something. I think he doesn't like me much. He says I'll never amount to anything. He says I lack ex-pe-di-en-cy, whatever that means. Just now he told me I've pushed him to the limits of his endurance so he's locking me in the dungeon until after dinner."

"The dungeon?" I repeat. "Is that what he calls it?" The boy nods. "What's your name, lad?"

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"Charles. Charles Darwin."

"Your father wouldn't happen to be Robert Darwin, would he?"

"Do you know Father?" he asks.

"I've met a few members of your lineage. Apparently it is a Darwin tradition to punish their cubs by banishing them to the wine cellar — excuse me, the dungeon — where the sight of me is supposed to terrify them."

"I don't find you scary at all."

"Come to think of it, I don't find you scary either," I say.

The boy nods, apparently satisfied with the arrangement.

"Expediency," I say. "A concentrated effort in pursuing a particular goal or self-interest with efficiency and haste."

"I think you might be a very big bird. Do you come from a family of birds? Do you know how to fly? Are you lonely down here all by yourself?"

"I prefer solitude."

"Or maybe you are a fish, because of your scales."

"Land scales. I'd rather be a bird, anyway. I don't know how to swim, but I do know how to fly." I try to flex my wings, but it has been such a long time since I've used them that they flap just once, awkwardly and stiffly, so I give it up.

"I promise you, when I get out of here, I'll figure out where you come from," he says with exaggerated pride, tucking his thumbs under his suspenders.

"What if I don't want to know where I come from?"

"Everybody wants to know where he's from."

"I wouldn't bet my last shilling on that."

The boy puffs out his candle, and curls up on the wine cellar floor. "Do you mind if I take a nap, Birdie?"

Birdie?

In a matter of minutes he is sleeping peacefully. I smile. I do not ever remember smiling with any of the other Darwin stock. This one is different.

Charles Darwin.

"This is an incredible opportunity, Birdie! I must go, I simply must!"

Charles is talking about the expedition, of course, as outlined in his letter from the botanist, John Stevens Henslow. Charles, only twenty-two years of age, has been recommended by Henslow to a Captain FitzRoy, R.N., com-

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mander of Her Majesty's Ship the Beagle, preparing for a journey to survey the coasts of Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and several islands in the Pacific, to record chronometrical measurements around the globe. The short of it is, FitzRoy needs a nature-lover who can keep meticulous records.

"A trip around the world! And listen to this. Henslow recommended me as 'The best qualified person he knows likely to undertake such a situation.'"

"Not exactly a rave review," I say dryly. "You could well substitute 'madman' for 'person'."

He ignores my sarcasm. "There's more, Birdie. Henslow says Captain FitzRoy is 'A public-spirited and zealous officer of delightful manners, and greatly beloved by all his other officers!'"

"And were you the first chosen to undertake this situation, Charles?"

"Well, no," he admits.

"Others turned it down?"

"Well, yes. Henslow himself turned it down, but he didn't want to leave his wife, and Leonard Jenyns is a top-notch naturalist, but he is a clergyman first and foremost and he doesn't want to leave his parish in the lurch."

"Might I remind you that you are a clergyman, also."

"I am not," he replies heatedly. "Well, not yet, anyway. And you're not going to talk me out of this expedition, Birdie. I've already discussed it with Father, and I've sent my letter of acceptance to the captain. This is the perfect opportunity for me to document new species." He paused and stares at me. "Don't you see what this means, Birdie? At last I might be able to pinpoint your origins!"

"Ah-ha! You're doing this for me, aren't you, Charles?"

Silence. Of course I am correct. Ever since the first moment he saw me he has been driven to discover who and what and why I am.

He became interested in natural history, in minerals and sea shells and fossils, in pigeons, in marine life, always searching for clues to my origins. The Greek and Latin that Dr. Butler tried to teach him at Shrewsbury Grammar School made no impression upon him whatsoever.

When Charles turned sixteen, his father gave up on the boy ever gaining a classical education, and decided to send him to Edinburgh to study medicine. Alas, the sight of blood disgusted him, and he hated inflicting pain as much as most men hate bearing it, so he began to cultivate new and more interesting hobbies — zoology, geology, botany — and without the support

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or encouragement of his family or his masters at school, Charles continued to pursue my past, even though I constantly tried to dissuade him.

"Give it up, Charles. Get on with your life," I would lecture him. "I was here a long time before you were born, and I'll be here a long time after you are gone. I don't need to know where I came from. I will survive."

"I'll find you somewhere, Birdie. You'll see. I'll find you."

After Charles' failure at Edinburgh, old Robert Darwin began to think that the clergy might be the only respectable career left to his son — a fate, as far as I was concerned, that did not frighten Charles nearly enough. So, in 1828, off to Christ's College, Cambridge, he went, just in time for the Lenten term. Mathematics, theology, languages — how frustrated poor Charles became at this sacred institution of higher learning! The administration had absolutely no use for his true love, the natural sciences, and excluded them from the curriculum.

He wrote me from Cambridge about how his father, on one of his visits to the college, had berated him: "Father said I care for nothing but rat-catching, and that I will forever be a disgrace to myself and my family."

But Charles kept on.

It was at Christ's College that Charles met Henslow, and the opportunity for this boat ride came about.

As I look at the lad now, young and strong and healthy, full of red-faced determination, I see that his curiosity is stronger than any of the opposing forces in his life, and in a way I am almost jealous of his sense of urgency and wonder and purpose. What would it be like to possess such feelings?

"As I mentioned," Charles says, sitting cross-legged on the wine cellar floor, reminding me of the little Darwin who could so easily make me smile, "I have already sent my letter of acceptance to Captain FitzRoy, on one condition."

"One condition?"

"Yes. That I might be allowed to bring my faithful dog along with me, for comfort and companionship. It is a two-year expedition, after all."

"You don't own a dog."

"You noticed." He grins.

So in the end, I agree to the expedition for Charles as much as Charles agrees to it for me.

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IT IS A bright, December morning, in the year 1831. Charles and I stand on a hill in Devenport, overlooking the dockyard where the beleaguered Beagle sits half-sunk, looking more like a shipwreck than a ship. I appear in the guise of a dog: there is no limit to what dragons can do when they set their minds to it.

"She may appear to be in dire straights," says Charles, "but Henslow has assured me she's seaworthy."

"Ah, yes," I say. "Your dear friend Henslow, who so graciously turned down this commission so he could offer it to you."

"The Beagle has been five years at sea, so she's a bit battered, but she's been rebuilt from the inside out."

"How reassuring," I mutter.

"She used to be a three-masted, twenty-five-ton brig, carrying up to ten guns," he says as we walk through the shipyard and up to the Beagle, where some of the crew are busy loading supplies by winch and crane. Their sharp voices cut through the crisp morning air.

As we walk up the gangway he whispers to me, "Remember, don't talk to me in front of FitzRoy or the crew. You're supposed to be a dog."

"Aarf!" I say, and he shoots me a behave-yourself glare.

I entertain hopes that this FitzRoy might just be bright enough to deny me passage — the sea is no place for dead weight, after all — but when we board the regal Beagle, FitzRoy, dressed in a spectacularly clean English Naval uniform, rushes up to us, salutes us both, and shakes Charles's hand.

"FitzRoy, Captain FitzRoy!" he exclaims, scooping a monocle out of his breast pocket and slapping it over his left eye. "And you must be the young Darwin chap I've been expecting. And this must be your dog. What's his name?"

"Birdie," says Charles.

"Birdie, yes, of course, Birdie!" FitzRoy reaches down and scratches my snout. I snarl.

"What strange green coloration you have, and what a unique short-hair fur, the likes of which I have never before felt on any animal!" He adjusts his monocle, which makes his eye appear larger, while simultaneously making him squint. He smiles at me, then turns to Charles. "You'll have to keep him

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in the aft holds, below sea level."

"I understand," says Charles, without asking my opinion.

"One last thing before you board, Darwin. I run a clean ship. That means no rum or whiskey or spirits of any kind, including wine. Do I make myself clear?"

Charles is taken aback for a moment, then he nods. "Ah, yes, that smell. That's just Birdie. I gave him a wine bath before we arrived in Devenport. When I was at Edinburgh studying medicine, our professors discussed this new theory that alcohol might actually be used to sterilize — "

"Ah, say no more!" FitzRoy raises his hand. "We don't want the beast in heat. Progressive thinking, Darwin. We're going to get along just fine, you and I."

So I'm led by two members of FitzRoy's crew into the bowels of the ship, where I'm shoved into this dark room, and the hatch is slammed shut and padlocked over my head, at which point I gratefully assume my true shape. I can hear the tired old wood of the hull creaking against the waves. The hold smells of seaweed and mold.

I can only hope that this trip makes Charles happy, that he finds the treasure for which he has so earnestly been searching all these years. My origins. He's a good lad, after all, but he suffers from the same incurable ailment as all the others of his race: Restlessness.

I curl up in the corner, and sleep.

"It's about time you woke up," says Charles.

I yawn, stretch my arms and legs and wings. It's so hot and stuffy in the aft hold I can barely breathe, but the heat has made my wings more flexible, and for the first time in centuries I am aware of their strength.

"Is it morning already?" I ask.

"It's July already," he replies with a touch of disapproval in his voice. "We're in Maldanado, in case you're in the least bit interested." He stares at me and frowns. "I never knew you to be such a sound sleeper."

"I was hoping I would sleep through the entire expedition. If it weren't for this infernal tropical weather, I might have been able to do it."

"Honestly, Birdie, I don't even know why I bothered bringing you along."

"Nor do I. All I've done is trade one dungeon for another."

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I notice Charles is almost as pale as the first time we met, and he's sitting on the floor in a rather hunched position, as if ill. He rubs at the dark circles under his eyes.

"What's wrong, Charles?"

"Would you like something to eat?" he says without lifting his head. "The seamen have been netting shark for two weeks."

"No, thank you."

"Don't you ever get hungry? I don't believe I've ever seen you eat. To tell the truth, that bothers me. Are you a carnivore? Are you going to suddenly burst into a feeding frenzy and consume the crew?"

I search my memory. "I seem to remember eating once, a long time ago. Something makes me say a spinach salad, somewhere in France. Now why don't you tell me what's really bothering you?"

"Would you really like to know?" he says, raising his voice, glaring at me through glossy, red-streaked eyes. He pushes himself up off the floor. "I've been seasick since the first day we set sail. FitzRoy is an ass — that's right, an ass! He's a Creationist for God's sake, Birdie! He thinks God snapped His fingers and created all living things in their past, present, and future forms, just like that!"

Charles tries to snap his fingers but he's shaking so badly he can't quite pull it off. In this day and age, ardent Creationists aren't scarce enough, as far as Charles is concerned, and those who believe in Progressionism are just as bad. Progressionists would explain fossil discoveries and archaeological finds as proof of nothing more than successive intermittent catastrophes, with God destroying and replenishing the globe with new species after each cataclysm, Noah's flood being the last of them. ("The existence of all species can be explained using the sound principles of science," Charles once told me. This from a graduate of Christ's College, Cambridge. Amen.)

"And that crew!" Charles raves on. "You'd think a bunch of seamen who have sailed to almost every known port in the world would have something a little more stimulating to discuss than food, ale, and naked women!"

Charles begins to sob. I reach out and take him under my wing. "There, there, Charles, everything will be fine. The longer they're at sea, the less interested they'll be in talking about food and ale."

"Try to stay awake, will you, Birdie?" he snuffles. "Just so I have someone intelligent to talk to."

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I get him to relax a bit, and then I get him talking, which is something he seems to need desperately.

He tells me about the lofty mountains of Porta Praya, and their groves of cocoa-nut trees and tracts of lava plains and herds of goats. He tells me of the octopus that sprayed him with a jet-stream of water on the rocky shore of St. Jago. He tells me of the stark-white rocks of St. Paul, the vast Brazilian forests, the reddish-brown sea of the Abrolhos Islets. He tells me of the vampire bats in Engenhodo and how they bite the horses there, and how the large black-and-ruby spiders of St. Fe Bajada feast upon prey ten times their own size.

All of this between bouts of tears, while I rock him gently in the crook of my wing.

And then, exhausted, in the middle of a sentence about a sparkling apricot-and-flamingo-colored sunset in Rio de Janeiro, he falls fast asleep. I feel his fragile body shivering beside me like that of a tiny butterfly. The heat is stifling. The H.M.S. Beagle rolls helplessly in the waves, like a wine barrel, and I think: Oh, how I miss the sweet smell of wine! I smell nothing here but salty sea water and fish, fish, fish, like a Venetian summer (although how I remember a Venetian summer I do not know). Charles is feverish. Why did I ever allow him to go through with this?

In the days that follow, Charles's spirits brighten under my care and attention. He is excited about leaving the ship and traveling by land from Bahia Blanca to Buenos Aires. He is reluctant to leave me behind, but I assure him that I will be fine.

When he finally meets up with the Beagle again, he seems more energetic. He has collected hoards of specimens, some to dissect, some to stuff, and others merely to observe. He seems his old self again — enthusiastic, inquisitive, determined, even expedient. He has returned with a gift for me, a bright, jade-crimson-turquoise-colored blanket, woven by a half-naked woman of some South American Indian tribe. It's big enough to fit around me like a shawl. Much to my surprise, I adore it.

I notice he has returned with something else as well. His skin is covered with red bumps, some of them swollen, some of them scabbed, and he cannot stop himself from scratching. "We were attacked by large, black bugs as we crossed the Pampas."

"What kind of bugs?"

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"Benchuca, I believe."

"What can we do for the itch?" I ask.

"Nothing. Nothing can be done. The bumps will disappear soon. You can stop mothering me now." And then he smiles and winks.

"Welcome back," I say.

So the days turn into weeks, months, and so on and so forth...the Falkland Islands, the Straight of Magellan, Chile, Peru, and the Galapagos Archipelago fall behind us. Once in a while, late at night, Charles sneaks me on deck where I watch the waves roll beneath the ship, look up at the bright moon and the vast canvas of stars, and feel the salty spray of the sea upon my face.

Charles's gloominess returns only when he finds it necessary, every so often, to inform me that he has still found no clues to my origins. On such occasions he hangs his head low and speaks into his chin and cannot look me in the eye.

This infuriates me. Why can he not let go of this childhood obsession with the origin of my species? But I keep my anger to myself. Charles needs my support. He has dealt with more defeatism and opposition in a quarter-century of his life than I've seen in eight or nine centuries of mine.

I am a dragon, I remind myself, and Charles is only a man.

When we set sail for Van Diemen's Land, Australia, the crew begins to talk about something more than food and ale, more even than naked women, and I don't like what I'm hearing. Apparently the aborigines there were run off by the white settlers only a few months ago, and since that time raids and burnings and robberies and murders have become commonplace, the aborigines striking back with small ambushes whenever and wherever possible.

When we drop anchor, I tell Charles, "I don't want you going ashore. The natives are restless."

"Nonsense, Birdie. The town is secure and most of the natives have been deported to another island. We'll be docked for ten days and I'll need to make some excursions inland to examine the unique geological structures of the area."

"You've got more than enough — "

"Birdie, this expedition is nearly at its end and I've still found no clues to your origins! There are some highly fossiliferous strata in Van Diemen's Land, and I must take every opportunity to — "

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"My origins! My origins!" I feel the heat rise into my snout. I rear back on my haunches, and my nostrils begin to flare. "Why can't you just give it up!" I can't remember the last time I've been angry enough to smolder like this.

Charles takes a step back. For the first time in all the years we have known each other, he is afraid of me. Why do I worry so about Charles? I am a dragon. What do I care for the ephemeral pursuits of Man? And yet I do care about Charles.

The heat of the moment passes. I plop down on the floor, let my nostrils fizzle out, and pull my Indian blanket up around my neck and shoulders. "I'm sorry," I say.

Charles exhales slowly, trying to pretend he was not frightened, though we both know he was. "It's been a long voyage for us all," he says. "I think everyone is tired, including you. Just remember to keep your voice down. We don't want FitzRoy catching on to us this late in the game."

"FitzRoy couldn't catch a mountain if Mohammed dropped it on him."

"Have you ever met Mohammed?" he asks.

"Possibly," I answer.

Charles climbs out of the aft hold, leaving me to stew for ten days.

Only it's not ten days when the trouble begins. I hear the explosions of black-powder rifles. My ears perk up. Men are shouting. I smell smoke.

"Charles?" I climb the steps of the aft hold. The hatch is padlocked shut. I feel the anger rise within me. My belly churns like a furnace and I feel my throat burn with red heat. It has been so long since I've erupted, it almost frightens me. My body trembles. My throat tastes like coal. My saliva drips like hot tar. I am appalled at the digestive system I must house in order to manage such an internal inferno.

I rear back and belch, blowing a fire hole through the hatch. There is nothing left to do but burst onto the upper deck. It is a pitch-black night. The Beagle has been abandoned.

All hands are on shore. It seems that the aborigines have attacked the town.

Charles!

I leap overboard, splash into the sea. The water drowns my fire, and I sink like a stone. I suddenly remember that I can't swim. But I know how to fly,

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so I start flapping my wings. Higher, higher, higher I rise — and finally I break the surface.

Into the great mysterious night I fly! It has been so long. Centuries! Up over the Beagle, over the sea that ripples the gold-orange of the burning town below me, up over the town itself, I fly.

The aborigines are withdrawing. They've killed. They've taken prisoners. The townsfolk fire their balls aimlessly into the dark. But I am a dragon and my eyes can see everything. I can see the dancing spears of the natives, their hurried retreat, their wounded victims and struggling prisoners...and Charles! Charles has been taken at spear point, his hands bound behind him, driven like an animal by a dozen aborigines into the black forest. If they reach the thick of the woodlands, I'll never find him, I'll never see him again.

The fire screams within me!

I dive!

"Chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarles–!"

My fire rakes through the aborigines, setting the field of their retreat aflame. They scream. Charles screams. I make my pass and my wings caress the air and I circle back, a trail of fiery phlegm cutting through the black night, and I dive again. One native, two natives catch fire and roll in the grass. The others run for their lives. Charles has fallen. Smoke billows. I circle and dive and circle, giving the natives a damned good look at me. I shall live in their nightmares for the next ten generations! But I must save Charles before the fire or the smoke take him. So I dive once more, and like a hawk snaring its prey I pluck Charles out of the grass with my talons and take to the air again.

He looks up at me with stark terror in his eyes, and his lips form the question: Birdie?

I glide low to the ground, as silent as the wind. I drop Charles in a safe field near town, and head back to the ship, without so much as a word to the poor boy. There is nothing to say. Charles has finally seen me for what I truly am, a dragon. It will take him time to adjust.

When I land on deck, I scorch a few more areas of the bulwarks to mask my escape and make it look like the aborigines tried but failed to burn the vessel, and then I climb down through the ruined hatch, back into the aft hold, and curl up on the floor with my blanket.

In the morning, after order has been restored, rumors pass among the crew of a flying creature all ablaze, a beast the size of a country-cottage,

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storming through the nighttime sky and wrecking havoc among the aborigines. But it was dark, and there was so much confusion and so many fires that most of the seamen do not believe the tales, or if they do, they aren't willing to admit the truth.

Charles is uninjured, but it is three days before he comes to the aft hold to tell me so.

"I never should have gone ashore, Birdie."

"Wisdom is hard-learned," I tell him.

But at least Charles has come to me. I believe this is a gesture of acceptance. Man, I have come to learn, is a creature of metaphor.

The two-year expedition runs five years in all. When we return, I retire to the Darwin dungeon. It is my home, after all. I curl up with my Indian blanket, and sleep.

Charles visits me often in that first year, and together we compile his Journal of Research into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by H.M.S. Beagle under the Command of Captain FitzRoy, R.N. It's Charles's bright idea to include FitzRoy's name in the title, a point on which he refuses to compromise in spite of my objections. Otherwise, I edit the manuscript for him, suggesting some stylistic enhancements, all of which he agrees to, including striking all references to his faithful Birdie, a point on which I refuse to compromise because I insist upon protecting his scientific integrity.

After the publication of the Journal, he is lionized by London's intellectual society, his career as a scientist catapults, and I know I'll never have to worry about Charles settling in as a country clergyman in some obscure backwoods parish.

Still he visits me often, to tell me of an exciting speaking engagement, or of a treasured new colleague, or of an admiring letter from some American naturalist, and one day when he comes, he tells me of his cousin, Emma Wedgwood, to whom he has proposed marriage.

Even after he is married and moves to Upper Gower Street in London, he thinks to visit me occasionally. He comes to tell me about his children, and how he will be among the first generation of Darwins not to punish his cubs by banishing them to the dungeon on Mount Darwin.

One day when he comes, he is so ill he can barely lift the wine cellar doors

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and make his way down the steps. He is weak and nauseous and suffering from heart palpitations. He does not stay long.

It is many months before I see him again, and when I finally do, he tells me his symptoms have worsened, and I can see he has lost weight and appears deathly pale.

"I am not likely to improve, Birdie. I am suffering from the attack of the Benchuca, the great black bug of South America. Do you remember the day I returned to the ship riddled with bites, after my hike through the Pampas?"

I remember, but I say nothing.

"The disease carried by the Benchuca is fatal," he says. "It can also be long and painful. I had hoped that after having gone so long with no symptoms, I might not have been infected, but it was not to be."

Charles carries with him a stack of notebooks and papers he can barely hold in his arms. He spreads them out on the floor and stares at me. "I have been working on a theory," he says. "Will you help me?"

AMONG THE volcanic outcrops known as the Galapagos Islands, off the coast of South America, each island claims its own distinct population of birds and animals. Although there were obviously common ancestors, the fauna of each island developed separately, despite only a modest oceanic separation.

When Charles traveled across the islands, he noticed that the finches have become so distinct from one island to the next that they can no longer interbreed.

Charles has read Lamarck's hypothesis, dating back to the eighteenth century, that all living matter has an inherent drive toward increased complexity. This intrigues him, as does Buffon's theory, which suggests that environmental conditions as well as the struggle for survival might lead to the extinction of some species, and the succession of others.

"We also must consider Lyell's belief in uniform geological change," says Charles. "As geological alterations occur, this must bring about changes in the natural habitat of all living things."

We assemble the evidence, piece by piece, until it all finally makes sense.

Global changes. Genetic mutations. The struggle of all species for survival. Natural selection.

Evolution. It is not my origin that Charles has discovered during the

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voyage of the Beagle, it is his own.

And yet just when the theory of Man's evolution becomes so absurdly obvious that neither of us can ignore it, ignore it is exactly what we do. We push aside our papers and relax to the smell of wine and cedar and moist earth, and spend most of our time together talking about death.

"I am looking forward to my death, Birdie," Charles says. "Death is the last great challenge of Man."

"You have always been too curious for your own good," I tell him.

Charles slides a Chilean cigar out of his pocket. I flare my nostril for him. He sticks the cigar in my snout and puffs hard on the butt, then succumbs to a coughing fit.

"Charles, I want you to know that I am very sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

"In many ways I am responsible for your malady. If not for me, you never would have gone on the expedition, and you never would have been attacked by the Benchuca."

"No, no, don't you see, Birdie? You have given me my life, not my death. If I had not met you, I never would have been driven to explore, I never would have lived through such exciting adventures. Death is merely a consequence. That is the way of Man, Birdie. We pay for our lives with our deaths."

I nod, but I do not understand. How can I?

"Because of you," I say, "I was able to share in that adventure." I am surprised to discover that this matters to me.

"You know, I could have died at the hands of those aborigines. I have never properly thanked you for saving my life, Birdie."

"Think nothing of it."

"I'm sure it is a point of less concern to someone who has lived centuries, probably eons." Charles coughs. He does not possess the lung strength to keep the cigar lit, so he stubs it out in the dirt. "Man needs to believe in his life after death. Man must have his gods."

Ah, yes. Charles is afraid of the changes his insights might bring about among his species. He is afraid of how his race might suffer without the comfort of the Book of Genesis. He does not see what I see. He does not have the perspective of centuries.

"Charles," I say. "What does your theory tell you about Man?"

He looks at me blankly.

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"Adaptation, Charles," I explain gently. "If Man needs new gods and new beliefs, I promise you that he will devise them. It is not only the body that evolves, but also the spirit."

"But does Man want new gods?" he asks dubiously.

"I cannot say," I answer. "If he does not, rest assured that he will create new reasons to believe in the old ones."

"I am very tired, Birdie," he says. And this is the last thing he will ever say to me.

Charles is supposed to visit me today, but when or if he arrives, I will not be here. I have decided that I cannot watch him die.

So I am alone in the wine cellar when I scribble Charles Darwin's name across the cover page, and affix a title to our manuscript: Upon the Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection, or Preservation of Favoured Races and the Struggle for Life.

I don my Indian blanket and tuck the manuscript under my wing and climb the stairs of the wine cellar. I push open the doors and step out into the bright morning sun.

I think I shall take the train to London — or perhaps I shall fly — to Albemarle Street, and in my human guise, much as I hate corsets and bustles, I will personally deliver the manuscript to the publishing company of John Murray. I was impressed by the job they did with the 1845 edition of the Journal, quite a money-maker from what I understand, and I am certain they will be eager to print Darwin's newest work. In any event, I must do what Charles cannot. I must offer Man the truth. It is essential, I think, for the continued development of his species.

Then I shall find another place on this Earth to live. Mount Darwin will never be the same without Charles. The future Darwins, like those before him, seem a dull lot. I am a dragon: I can fly, I can set a field aflame with my breath, I can see things clearly in a way that men, even so gifted a man as Charles, cannot, and I have needs of my own.

The boy has overcome his initial surprise at seeing me, and now sits down on the floor, cross-legged, a few feet away.

"Why have your parents locked you down here?" I ask. He stares at me uncomprehendingly, and I switch to German.

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"No one locked me here," he answers. "I often come here to think."

"And what do you think about?" I ask.

He shrugs. "It is difficult to express," he says. "They are very big thoughts," he adds seriously.

A warm glow suffuses me. "Sometimes I think very big thoughts myself." I pause. "I think we are going to become friends."

"I would like that."

"What is your name, boy?" I ask.

"Albert," he says.

"Albert," I repeat. "That is a very nice name. And I am Birdie."

I wrap my Indian blanket around me. I am content.

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Felicity Savage has just completed her second year at Columbia University, and already her writing career is underway. She has sold F&SF *a number of short stories, including her first, "Brixtow White Lady," which appeared in our March issue.* Tomorrow Magazine *recently published her second short story, and she has sold two novels to Roc Books.*

About "Ash Minette" she writes, "'Cinderella' is an example of the fairy tale of the ugly duckling commoner who makes good. But within the European culture that produced the story, poor men had few opportunities to escape their situation, poor women had even fewer, and poor, plain *women had absolutely none at all." Many writers have taken their own angle on this familiar fairy tale, but none from this particular point of view.*

Ash Minette

By Felicity Savage

MY DRESS FOR THE BARON of Helmany's ball was violet sateen, off the shoulders, with frothy lace cuffs to conceal my cracked fingers. It was the best I could manage in a week, sewing late at night after I finished the work I brought home from Madame Carolla's. Libby had found ten yards of pink silk, very cheap, but unflattering to her complexion. Never mind, she said, and I whipped it up into a gown in the latest mode. She modeled it for me after her last client of the night had departed. Ella was asleep in her boxroom, safe from the improprieties of her elder sisters; shutters rattled belowstairs as the landlord closed up his tavern. The candlelight in our attic erased the imperfections from Libby's round, heavy features: she seemed time-smoothened, a madonna of golden stone. But when she posed for me in the dress, her over-ripeness — the way she thrust out her chest, the coy glances — spoilt the illusion, corrupted it with indecent knowledge.

"Well," I said tentatively.

"Oh, don't bother." She waved my judgment aside. "I know it doesn't

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suit me. But that really isn't important, as long as it doesn't gape open down the back. It'll be such fun. The other girls standing outside the gates, shivering in their bare shoulders and their openwork slippers, and me *inside*. For once, inside." She twirled, ducking to avoid the sloping rafters. "I think I've got enough put by for us to hire a carriage. I'll wave to Francine and Sharon and Marie as they flutter their eyelashes at the fine gentlemen."

I shook out my skirts and ran my fingers through my golden hair. It is my one beauty. "What about me? Am I alluring?" Please tell me so, I prayed. Even if it's not true.

"It's a beautiful dress, Minette, as good as anything Madame Carolla can make."

"But how do I look?" I lifted up the hair off the back of my neck and tried to imitate her come-hither smile. "I want to be *wanted*, like you..."

She let out a giggle, and gathered me in her arms. Her hot breath tickled my neck, smelling faintly of codfish. "You don't want to be like me, Minette darling. You want to be beautiful. And that's your problem." Disappointment hit me hard in the stomach. Libby went on, "You're nineteen. Isn't it time to live instead of dreaming? You don't have to be a mousy little seamstress all your life."

"I'm so tired of being despised," I said passionately. "I'm jostled in the street, my purse is stolen, jokes are made about me in my hearing, because I'm a plain, poor woman, worthy of nothing but contempt. If I looked like Ella I would be happy. She has everything, and doesn't know it."

Libby laughed. "Darling Ella hasn't got a grain of sense in her head. No, Minette, you know who my favorite sister is."

"That doesn't help. I want to be loved, Libby. And not just by you."

Ashamed that I had confessed my secret longings, I fell silent, running my fingers over the low-quality sateen of my gown. A ray of pink dawn came through the window and made a mockery of our candle, showing up the cracks of age in Libby's face.

We Ingles sisters were all born blanks. As we grew, we developed certain differences. I believe that these started with the differences in our faces. I remember Libby five years old, wriggling while Nanny dressed her in a small replica of a lady's attire; I, three, tumbling determinedly toward the nursery grate; Ella cooing, pink-faced, in the midwife's arms. The day she was born,

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it became clear to our parents that their three *tabulae rasae* were not crafted with equal workmanship. "I have given birth to an angel," my mother sighed (so Father told us), and curled up in the great bed, its linen all bloodstained from her birthing, and went to sleep.

I crept upstairs with Libby, after the relatives in their sweeping dresses of black had come and gone. We didn't understand what had happened. We pushed open the oaken door. Far away across the carpet, Mother lay between unrumpled white sheets, stiff as a clothespeg doll, unmoving, her lips slathered with scarlet to make her look alive. Her hands lay like milky glass on the sheet. Nanny in her high cap came and hustled us away. I remember the hot smell of her starch. She murmured to newborn Ella in her arms, as she swept us toward the nursery: "Poor thing, poor love-a-dove. Growing up all alone, your father a clever man, but unfit to care for so much as a mouse..." She turned on us, her meaty face fierce. "Look after Baby. You two great lumps of girls, you must promise you'll love her in place of the mother she doesn't have."

We stumbled over our tongues to promise. We were three and five years old.

And though I may complain, though I may envy her her face, I love Ella as if she were my own child. I feel a swell of pride when she walks ahead of me into the market, singing a little tune, her step jaunty, a wicker basket swinging on her arm. And the stallkeepers and matrons and beggar-boys fall silent.

Nanny must have known she would be dismissed. It seemed to us as if Mother's death pulled a brick out from the bottom of Father's elaborate financial pyramid. And indeed it was Mother who had the noble title; Father was merely a clever man. We moved to a smaller house, skimped meals, darned clothes, heated cow's milk for Ella. In the vague way children do, we came to realize just how slender a base (like that of a gyroscope) our luxurious lifestyle had balanced on. When I was ten, Father ceased to work, even as a solicitor, by which means he had kept up our dignity. We moved to the city. His sole comforts now were the kindness which comes in brown glass bottles — and Ella, who had grown into a spritely child, with hair like golden mist and eyes like summer skies.

When I was sixteen, the brown bottles got the better of him. We, the bereaved, leased this apartment. With every move, we had sunk lower in

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society, and this district is in the center of the city: riddled with vice and illicit pleasures, but possessing a veneer of patched respectability. The apartment has only three rooms, and the kitchen is no wider than an armspan, but Ella still complains how much work it is to keep house. This whining is the way, I believe, in which she works out her grief for Father. I work fourteen hours a day, in the recesses of Madame Carolla's Dress Shop. Libby works at night, in this very attic, or sometimes in alleys. She gave up hope of marrying because she had no dowry, and now she says she wouldn't if she were given the choice.

We have been here three years.

The Baron is a foreigner. His country lies east of here, ringed by mountains, the hills furry with trees. I have heard that his hair is the color of black earth and his eyes like sapphires. His list of ladies and gentlemen in Society must be sadly out of date, for when he prepared to hold a winter ball in our city, he sent an invitation to Father "and his lovely wife Marguerite." It found us just a week ago, grimy and tattered. I had to give tuppence to the urchin who brought it.

"We deserve to go," Libby and I told each other. "We work hard. We should give ourselves a treat." (Although the preparations so far have been more a misery than a treat.) "We are going."

But Ella is not. All these years we have striven to preserve her innocence, and we will not have it shattered now. From our life here in Riverbank, we know the rich are more perverted than the poor, or maybe they're just less ashamed of showing it: Libby says the lord or two she has had wanted things of her that no Riverbank man would dream of. We refuse to expose Ella to such sordidity. I may be timid, but I understand what is happening around me, I wear no rose-tinted spectacles. *She* knows what goes on upstairs when she is asleep, but I don't think she envisions the act. Like a child, she romanticizes it.

But she was Father's favorite, and ever since babyhood he filled her head with tales of the old life, when full-bearded gentlemen escorted tinkling ladies to dinner, and music flowed out of the windows of our mansion. This, she says, is the greatest disappointment of her existence. She sulks in the kitchen, pressing her face against the grimy glass, so that the prentices passing in the street gawp up at her; and then, diverted, she flirts with them

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through the window. She does not understand. "I want to go," she whines over and over.

We stand in the doorway with our ugly old wraps over our dresses, watching for the carriage through the gusting snow. Libby's patience is worn to a thread. "Absolutely not," she snaps. "Now get back upstairs, you'll catch your death."

"Minette...?" Ella begged. "Pleeeease take me with you! I want to meet a handsome noble, and marry him, and live in a mansion..."

"Good Lord, child," I said, my voice high with excitement. "Where did you get *that* idea?"

"I'm not as stupid as you think." Ella glowered, beautiful even in the lanternlight of the entryway, her lower lip stuck out, her brown dress cinched around the waist with Father's old belt. "I listen to people talking. Sharon Cooke told me nobles are kinder and handsomer than Riverbank men. She said if you look pretty and can dance well, you stand a chance of netting one, no matter what your birth." She outstretched her arms and broke into a waltz, there in the cramped passage. She would have made a brilliant *danseuse*, among many other things. "And anyway, I *am* born to it, even if our fortunes have fallen."

"Oh, will you stop your capering." Libby's teeth chattered. She gave Ella a push. "I've worked with Sharon many a night. She likes to believe birth doesn't count, but it does. Birth and breeding. The lords might fuck her, but they wouldn't marry her if she was the most ravishing beauty in the city."

Ella's eyes widened. "Sharon would never work with *you*." Libby winced involuntarily. Ella said with unintentional, adolescent cruelty, "She's got real employment. She knows things. And she's right! Nothing else counts, as long as you're pretty enough!"

She fled upstairs, crying.

After a silence, "We *do* deserve it," I repeated, trying to convince myself. "We work our hands to the bone to buy bread, while she sits at home, dusting the mantelpiece. We *do* deserve to go."

"Yes." Libby wiped one eye, careful not to smudge her powder. "We do. But that was hard. Here — here's the carriage." She stepped into the street and hailed it. Pulled up sharp, the horses pranced, tossing their heads, as if they considered it beneath their dignity to venture this deep into the bowels of the city.

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Inside the carriage, I gazed up through the leaded panes. Ella sat with her chin on her hands in the boxroom window, silhouetted against the amber glow of a candle. Now and again she dabbed her eyes with her sleeve. "She's crying," I said. "But she knows we're watching. Don't fret." My excitement was returning. Tonight, I thought, I would enjoy myself — and just maybe I would change my life. I did not know how or where, but perhaps I would find love.

Here is the story of what happened while we were at the ball, as I had it from Ella next day:

After we had clattered away, she being no longer observed, she started to leave the window. But the snow stopped, and she became fascinated with the shadow she cast on the white street. She got out her little treasures — a fan, a pair of drop earrings that had been Mother's, a comb Father had bought her — and experimented with her image, piling her hair on top of her head, half-hiding her face, glancing ingenuously over her bare shoulder. It was thus Duchess Chiliver saw her. The foreign Duchess was trotting along the street in her eggshell carriage, badly out of temper, late for the Baron's ball, not even sure whether she wanted to go. (You must understand that here I am using my imagination.) Her coachman was new to the city, and had lost his way in the slums. "What is that enchanting little picture in the window?" the Duchess said to her maid-in-waiting. "Stop the carriage! Marianne, dear, go and knock on the door."

"Madame, the ground is wet. I will spoil these lovely slippers you gave me."

"Nonsense. It's only snow. See what that girl really looks like — if she is as lovely as her silhouette. If she's only a courtesan whiling away time between customers, at least you can ask her which way it is out of these awful slums."

When the maid was gone, the Duchess sat back, fanning her plump, bepowdered face. "These locals," she muttered to herself. "They can't tell a leper from a Marquise. I do hope..." Her entrepreneurial eye had seen a wealth of possibilities. Also an excuse for being late to the ball. She was renowned for her shrewd choice of protegées: they had become, among others, a famous ballerina and a politician's mistress.

The carriage door swung open, letting in a blast of icy air. The maid's face

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was bright pink, but not from the cold. "Madame," she gasped, "you must come and see — "

Behind her, an angel hovered in the entryway, her golden hair haloed in the light.

THE BARON'S mansion was outside the city, on the edge of a frozen lake. Lanterns on flower-stem-like wooden poles illuminated the lawns which sloped down to the ice. Candles garlanded the trees. The French windows stood wide open, but the house was heated so efficiently by its many fires that, coming inside, one passed from cold to hot as if walking into a sweat-lodge. A buffet supper was spread in the dining room. In the ballroom, an orchestra played on and on and on. I thought I should never escape the strains of those minuets and fandangoes. I hear them in my head still.

The flounced, ruffled dresses of the Ladies and Marquises and Baronesses floated on the streams of sound, like miniature sailing ships. Supported by their upright black counterparts, they bobbed into every corner, gathered in backwaters talking animatedly, spilled out over the frost-tinged lawns. Bare arms glowed pale in the shadows where perversions were already being practiced. The faces of the women were no more extraordinary than ours: but they had the courtesan's art of disguise. What we saw were elaborate, laughing contrivances. The men embraced them lustfully, but this seduction was itself contrived. I believe that this is why Ella was such a success. She was not contrived at all.

Until about eleven o'clock, Libby stayed by my side. She was as shy as I, not because her gown was inferior to the ladies' (I keep that tiny scrap of pride), but because she had no one else to talk to. From the moment we came in the door, and the haughty doorman made us produce the tattered parchment to prove our identities, we were out of place, like daisies in a prize flower arrangement. The ladies embraced, the lords shook hands and exchanged glasses of champagne; we caught snatches of conversation by which we knew they had all been to the same parties last night, last week, last year. Perfumes washed over us like an aromatic rainbow. We had thought it indelicate to wear any, because Libby and the girls outside the gates doused themselves with scent of a night, to disguise other smells. We had been wrong.

Every move we made seemed wrong.

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When the Baron stretched out his hand to us, Libby grinned and kissed him on both cheeks as if they were old friends. Her smile was almost silly. Mortified, I slid away from behind her. But my head was spinning; I do not know if I should have had the strength to touch him. The inside of my chest prickled slowly, in waves. My eyes were dazzled.

He was the most suave of all the nobles; the most elegant of the gentlemen; he had the most delightful foreign accent. Neat teeth, violet eyes, dark curls of hair on the backs of his hands. I had not touched him, not spoken to him nor made eye contact. I watched as he turned and bowed and kissed hands, jousting good-humoredly with his friends. I wanted to wrap myself around him. I wanted — I wanted — my stomach was hollow with wanting.

I was in no condition to talk. Libby's attempts at chatter produced raised eyebrows and silences like clear puddles. Blushing, we withdrew to a dimly lit alcove behind the orchestra. Libby was subdued. I trembled gently, my mind pulsing.

At last Libby said, "Damn it if I'm not going out there, Minette. I know how to do one thing well, and I'm going to do it."

I clutched at her. She was my flotsam in a sea of helplessness, of melting dreams. "Don't leave me alone!"

"Don't be so shy, Minette. If you don't talk to the gentlemen, how are you ever going to make one love you?"

"I've given up *that* hope," I said wretchedly. "I only want one, and I can never have him."

"Not the Baron. Not even you are so silly."

I looked up at her with guilty eagerness. She knew about men and women; perhaps she could help me...

She blew out breath in exasperation. "Oh yes, you look just like a fine lady of Helmany," she said, and turned and strode away.

The group of young gentlemen she joined looked as nervous as I. Perhaps it was their first dance, too. I had not a jot of compassion to spare for them. In the golden light of the chandeliers, I saw that Libby was presenting herself as a whore, her body language advertising it clearly in the delicate atmosphere of the ball. She captured one of the boys with ease. Heads turned as he took her arm, and I heard murmurs of surprise, but neither noble nor servant moved to throw her out. I do not think they connected her with the gauche

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lady who had shaken the Baron's hand. The gap between guest and courtesan, through in private it might not exist, was publicly impossible for them to bridge.

The Baron stood not twenty feet from me, talking to a pretty, red-haired woman seated on a couch. She looked up into his face, her body angled toward him: at first they seemed intimate, and I could have sworn I saw them brush lips, but then one corner of his mouth developed a sardonic twist, so it seemed that he mocked her with every word. My heart lightened. Eventually he chucked the woman under the chin, quite hard, so that her head snapped back, and strolled away. The red-haired woman sat very still for a minute, then dropped her forehead to the back of the couch.

Libby reappeared and began to work the edges of the dance floor. From my hiding place, I saw that her lip rouge was smeared.

A murmur arose by the doors. I looked that way wearily, my eyes blurred with other people's perfume and unshed tears. The guests parted to let her step onto the dance floor. Floating in a mist of naïve awe, in a gown the color of her eyes, with pearls around her throat, she waved to them all, a proud little flutter of fingers.

"Baron," trilled a woman's voice, "look here at what I found, in the city, not an hour's drive away. Doesn't she remind you of my little goose girl, and the others?"

She danced without stopping all evening. If the plump, white-gowned Duchess had not early on taken charge of her schedule, I think she would have given a dance to every gentleman who asked. Now and again she stopped to accept champagne from the servants, who practically crawled at her feet, grinning like pet dogs. The Marquises and Countesses watched her hostilely. Unaware that she was envied, she smiled at them all — and then, captivated by her sweetness, they had to smile back. She waved at Libby, and would have dashed to meet her, bubbling with excitement, but Libby ducked under people's arms and out of the ballroom. She knew *that* would have been the end of Ella's popularity.

"Who was that, my lady?" a gentleman asked her.

Ella looked as if she were about to tell the truth, then she tittered. "Someone I thought I knew. Nobody, my lord."

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Later, of course, she and the Baron danced. They drifted past my hiding place, twined in each other's arms. Their blue eyes were locked. His hand trembled, splayed like a hairy starfish on her back. Ella chewed her lip. Both of them looked as if they were in pain: bruises in sensitive places, perhaps, that hurt when they moved. The orchestra played slower and slower for them, violins wailing like grasshoppers in the forests. I put my knuckles to my eyes and wept.

Libby appeared at my side, breathing hard. "We're going home."

"What, aren't you making as much here as you would in the Golden Hog?" I said viciously through my tears.

She indicated her bosom. Five or six strands of jewels dripped into her cleavage. "They keep them in their pockets just for gifts to courtesans. No, it's that I can't stand to think of you here in the shadows, crying your heart out over that ugly little Baron. Will you fetch Ella or shall I?"

"How can you talk of him like that?" I sobbed. "He's the most beautiful man in the room!"

"He's cruel and stupid. If I didn't love Ella so much, I'd say they suit each other nicely. But she doesn't understand what she'd be getting into, she doesn't *see*. I wouldn't leave her with this lot for a minute. Look at their teeth. The minute they get her alone, they'll tear her to pieces." She shuddered. Her words were so heartfelt that I scrutinized the ballroom again. Everyone was watching Ella, yes. Could I possibly have misread their indulgence and admiration?

"I want to watch him." I followed the Baron with a yearning gaze. "Just a little longer..."

"Ella! Ella!" Libby shouted, flinging away from me. "We're going home!" Our sister posed on the far side of the dance floor, surrounded by a worshipful court of young gentlemen. She was refusing their offers of drinks because the Baron had just slipped away for a minute to get her something. Her cheeks were flushed, her teeth flashed. "Come on, Ella!" Libby grabbed her and started pulling her straight across the floor.

"No! Don't! Libby — "

"We're leaving."

Ella twisted in Libby's grasp. "Come for me, Baron!" she cried out to the crowd. "Please! Soon!"

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A bitter taste came up into my mouth. The gaudily colored dresses swam before my eyes. My head spun with the mixture of perfumes as I stumbled along in Libby's wake. Before I knew it, we were hurrying down the broad steps, snow whirling around us. Icy cold knifed into me. "Goddamn it, where's the carriage?" Libby squinted left and right through the snow, gripping our hands tightly. Ella was crying, and I suspect I was too. "Coachman!" Libby screamed. "There he is!" She dragged us across the drive, practically under the feet of the blowing, stamping horses, and pushed us bodily into the snug interior just as a party of gentlemen burst out of the mansion. The door slammed.

Ella huddled small, crying uncontrollably.

"Whatever's wrong? Go, coachman! To Riverbank! Ella, darling, what is it?"

"Leave me — alone! I've lost — my shoe — " Ella gasped. "I love him so much — I didn't tell him — goodbye — "

We knew she was not crying for want of the shoe. But one of her feet *was* bleeding, peeking out from under the pearl-trimmed hem, her toes cut by the gravel under the snow.

Madame Carolla's shop buzzed with customers spreading gossip. The Baron of Helmany had mounted a search throughout the city. He swore he would find the girl who had dropped the slipper on the steps of his mansion, or die trying. Every golden-haired woman who aspired to a barony was queueing up to try to force her foot into the shoe. "It is ridiculous," sniffed Madame Carolla. "All nobles are crazy, and those females trying on the shoe are worse."

"Oh, but it's so romantic," said one of the girls stitching beside me. "Do you know, he says that if she doesn't come to him, he will search all the houses in the city until he finds her?"

When I got home, I found Ella singing and sighing in turns over the housework. Having been starved for an audience, she immediately fell to prattling about the ball; it drove me away from her, to the attic. Crushing my face into the pillow, I writhed on my bed, hating myself, hating the face that had not given me a chance to win the Baron. I would have chopped my nose off if I thought it would do any good. His face hung before me, so close I could see the wide-spaced pores in his skin, could smell his dusky,

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slightly acrid perfume.

Libby came home at ten o'clock, unusually early. The poverty and squalor of Riverbank must have hit her especially hard after last night. I could imagine Ella's fervid babble about the Duchess and the Baron did not go down well. "If you want the bastard so much," I heard Libby shout, "why don't you go and find him? Nobody would refuse to give you a lift out of the city! Not with that pretty face!"

"But that wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be womanly. The Duchess told me all about being womanly," Ella said — seriously, I believe. "You don't know anything."

"I try so hard to protect you and Minette." Libby sounded as if she were almost crying. "And you never make it easy for me! You never give me the least bit of thanks — "

Then I heard Ella's footsteps running upstairs. She burst into the room, giggling desperately, bounded across my bed. "Hide me, Minette — hide me — "

A few moments passed. "It's all right," I said sourly. "She's not coming after you."

She poked her head up, squatting under the slope of the roof, resting her elbows on the bed. Cobwebs clung like silver hairnets to the golden mass. "That's good, I was scared she'd — Minette? What's wrong?"

I hid my face in my arms. I could not speak.

She touched my shoulder. "Minette, I love you."

Bitterness welled up inside me.

"The Baron is coming to fetch me. I can feel it in my bones. Isn't that wonderful? Do you know what he said to me? I love you because you are real. Mmmm... If he takes me to live in Helmany, you can come too. *And* Libby."

Little sister. Oh little sister, how easily I could come to hate you.

RIVERBANK FOLK are eager to help anyone who wants to poke his nose into other people's business. The matter of the glass slipper and the vanished girl must have captured their imaginations. They quickly made the connection between the tattered invitation the Ingles sisters received a week ago, and the Baron's search. He arrived at dawn, a few days later. A muffled cavalcade of horses and men stamped down the new-fallen snow. The Baron

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himself bestrode a dappled stallion. The gold thread on his riding costume glinted in the sunlight, and his handsome, cruel face was lit brightly. Looking down through the window, I knew I would have him if it killed me. He was everything I was not. I had sense enough to realize this, but I believed it meant that we would complement each other perfectly. The resolution hardened in my heart, blocking out all else.

Just because Ella was beautiful...! Our faces weigh too much in the balance of our destinies, I thought, and I ran upstairs to wake Libby.

"He's here," she said, instantly awake.

"Yes."

"Has he seen Ella?"

"No. I'm going to pretend I'm her. Please help me, Libby."

Her hair a dark, frowsy mat, her face still thick with paint, she knelt up in bed and looked out the window. "Let me think...your hair's the right color..." She chewed her lip. "But that's not enough, is it? You have to fit into the shoe. And she has such tiny feet."

"I have to have him, Libby. I know I've been ungrateful to you before — " I was nearly weeping with tension — "but please help me..."

"Oh, *gladly*," she said with an inflection I could not identify, and fumbled under her mattress. "I always keep this. Just in case." I gasped. She produced a long, wicked knife. "Give me your foot."

"No, Libby. You can't mean that."

"Do you want him as much as I think you do?" Her voice was bitter, and even vindictive, as if she were repaying me for all the injustices I had done her. "I thought you couldn't be as silly as Ella. But I was wrong. Wasn't I. Wrong about you, Minette. Give me your foot."

Bang! Bang! "Open up!"

It would not be long before they woke the street. I moaned. Libby said, "Women chop off bits of themselves, push themselves apart, squeeze themselves together, singe and tease their hair, make holes in their ears, tie their feet up so they will be smaller...all for beauty. You saw it last night. And this is a better cause than mere looks. *Isn't* it?" She sounded almost gloating as she said, "Are you afraid of the pain?"

No, I wasn't! Pain was no object!

I held out my foot, gritting my teeth, turning my head aside as if I feared Libby was going to take the knife to my face, uglifying me even more in

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exchange for my heart's desire.

I stood up in the little glass slippers, turned a circle, swaying on my feet. "It fits!" the Baron breathed. "It is she! My lady!"

He swept me into his arms, spun me around, my head nearly bumping the ceiling of our tiny parlor. My golden hair flew loose around the veil that covered my face. Smelling him so close, I nearly fainted, and not from blood loss alone. "My love," I whispered.

He made to lift the veil and kiss me, but I stopped him. Libby said swiftly, "My lord, surely you would not be so improper as to kiss your bride before the wedding."

He looked over at where she sat, ankles primly crossed, on the couch. He sounded as if he were mocking her as he said, "Oh, no, mademoiselle. Of course not."

But his thick, strong fingers curled mine with a suggestive pressure. One of the sentries muttered to the other, and they both snorted with laughter.

The mixture of pain and happiness made me so giddy I could hardly stand.

"Do you know what you have been concealing here?" the Baron said to Libby. "She is a real treasure, she is nothing like the other ladies of the court. That is why I have to have her. Let us be on our way, darling."

Libby embraced me at the door. She smelt of sweat, so pungent that I, rendered nauseous by my ordeal, had to hold my breath. I tasted strands of her hair. "He's going to try to get it on in the carriage," she hissed. "Don't let him. He *mustn't* see you before you're married. He's stupid enough not to feel the difference between your and Ella's figures, but he can't miss it if he sees your face. Once the priest has his say, though, there's not a damn thing he can do." The carriage bells jingled impatiently. She released me; then thought of something else and caught me back. "I love you." She kissed my cheek, leaving a greasy lip-print. "Be happy."

"Why were you goading me?" I whispered, at the end of my strength. "You were trying to make me angry."

She laughed humorlessly. "Let me tell you a secret. I wanted him too. Why did you think I kissed him in the receiving line, like a twelve-year-old girl with a crush? But I'm too coarse for the likes of him. It could never have happened."

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"Libby," I breathed, stunned, and fell away from her, stumbling independently of gravity, as if I were sinking backward into deep water. The Baron caught me and made a step with his hands, boosting me into the carriage. "Such a little foot," he gloated.

As we neared the end of the street, I heard a faint scream and looked back. A golden-haired figure pelted after the carriage, a scrap of nightgown fluttering around her thighs. The Baron asked me disinterestedly whether I knew who that might be.

"Oh — " I strove to keep my voice light — "just my little sister. I didn't have time to say goodbye to her. No doubt she is upset."

"I thought you only had one sister. No, no, love, don't bother with explanations." His voice was lazy. His arm went around me, his fingers kneading the soft flesh under my dress, just above my corset. I lost myself in the ecstasy of contact with him.

The dawn glanced red off the river. Once we crossed over, the light seemed to weaken, beating ineffectively on the filthy snow. The ground was already trampled, kicked up into slush by local urchins and their parents on their way to work. This was the worst part of Riverbank, too miserable to be even a little glamorous, too poverty-stricken to be respectable.

On the broadest thoroughfare, another carriage approached us, and halted. In the interests of courtesy we had to stop too. The Baron muttered a curse and lifted his face: he had been kissing my hair. "Probably some doddering Marquis who wants to pass the time of day, darling. But it doesn't do to be discourteous." He opened the window, letting in a rush of air so cold it froze my nostrils.

A plump yet drawn-looking woman leaned out of the window. "Baron! What a relief! I have been wandering around these slums ever since I left the mansion! This coachman does not know the river from a blind alley." The man sitting on the box looked weary, resigned to being dismissed as soon as the Duchess got home. "Can you beat the directions into his head, perhaps?"

"But of course, Duchess." The Baron beckoned me. "But first let me present my bride-to-be, Ella Laide."

"You found her! My dear!" the Duchess squealed. But then she looked at me suspiciously, and my heart thudded. "Ella? Is it you? It is not. Baron, this isn't my protegée."

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The Baron held me away and looked at me. "Of course it is. She is wearing the slipper, and what's more, her sister had the match to it."

The Duchess gave a social laugh that had not a grain of tolerance in it. "Baron, I sometimes think you are quite empty-headed. Or are all men the same in that respect? Of course it isn't Ella. Any fool could see that. Her sister has tricked you."

The Baron's eyebrows drew together.

I sobbed. I could not help myself. Far away, church bells rang.

"We shall find out just who it is, then," my husband-to-be said, and flicked the veil from my face.

THE SNOW burned my feet like hot coals. But it was worse torture to wear the slippers. The snow soaked through my dress, numbing my body where I leaned against the cold brick wall of a tenement. My tears froze on my cheeks. I did not think they would ever come off.

I smelt my own blood. Libby's expert bandages had not stood up to my tottering on them through the crowds of workers; they unwound and the blood flowed. I sank down among the beggars at the side of the road. The poor, truncated stumps stuck out in front of me. I could see the ends of whitish bone where my toes should be, filmed over by bright blood. The sides of my feet quivered, raw, where Libby had lopped off excess flesh.

A carriage went past in the street, kicking sheets of slush up from the wheels. Wearily I looked up. I knew how infrequent nobles' carriages were here; and from this low vantage, I understood the starved Riverbanker's desire to pounce on it and rape it of all it contained.

Hers golden, his dark brown, their heads rested side by side in the window. His arm lay along her shoulders, puffing up her hair. Her hand flew up as if in protest; he took her wrist and pulled it down.

They passed out of sight. The angry grumble of the thoroughfare resumed.

Little sister, how easy it is to hate you. I ought to feel sorry for you, because I know what you are destined for: a life of high-class abuse at the Baron's hands in the name of love, and eventually, transformation into one of the painted ladies, those who flutter frustrated on the edge of aristocracy.

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Your beauty won't protect you. But I can only covet your fate. Bleeding from the feet, weeping, I am uglier than ever I was before, but I cannot accept my condition, as Libby did years ago, even though I am unable even to stand up. The cold sun stings my bare, tear-swollen face.

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In 1993, Jane Yolen published her 140th book. It was a particularly good year for her. In addition to the publication, she won a Rhysling award for the best sf poem, and the Mythopoeic Society's award for the best fantasy novel. One of the books she edited for Jane Yolen Books (an imprint of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) won the Golden duck award for the best young adult fantasy novel.

"The Lady's Garden" is part of Jane's collection called Here There Be Unicorns, *which Harcourt Brace Jovanovich will publish this fall. The piece was written while she was in Scotland, which, she writes, "accounts for the British flavor of the story."*

The Lady's Garden

By Jane Yolen

IN THE LADY'S GARDEN lived three unicorns. They were all old — Lady, garden, and unicorns — having been there from the beginning of things. The garden was kept from the sight of the World by a very large stone wall which was overgrown with spindly weeds and thistles, and hairy moss plugging up the chinks.

When the sun shone down, the unicorns liked to lie under the apple tree, which was the oldest thing of all in the garden. Its branches hung down to the ground, gnarled and misshapen, but covered with the most delicious red apples the year round.

When it rained, which was an hour every other day and twice on Tuesdays, regular as clockwork, the unicorns would stay in the stone barn, snugged together in the sweet-smelling hay. The patter on the barn roof then took on a soporific rhythm, and often the unicorns would doze and dream. Their dreams were always about running over great green swards, the wind through the white manes. Always.

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If the Lady dreamed — or even she napped — no one knew for sure, for she only spoke of waking things: tide and sun and wind and rain and the changing of seasons.

On one side of the garden was, as I have said, the World. On the other was the Great Ocean. It was the Ocean's tide which was often the subject of the Lady's discourse. And though she may have thought any trouble to the garden would come to it from the World's side, it was the Ocean that did, in the end, bring about her direst time.

Now, though the unicorns were all terribly old, they were not the same age. The oldest was Wishart, whose skin was almost translucent; it was a kind of pearly white, like the inside of certain shells. When he walked — and he never ran — he moved with an ancient grace. His breath smelled musty, like a bowl of crushed flower petals. He rarely listened to anything but the sound of the Ocean outside the wall.

The second oldest was Tartary. Her skin was like vellum and looked brittle but wasn't. In fact it was as soft as an infant's and smelled that sweet-sour infant smell, as if talc and sour milk had been mixed together. Tartary listened only to the Lady's voice.

The third oldest — they called her Infanta when they called her anything at all — still had a bit of spirit to her walk, and a bit of flint in her amber eyes. Even her horn was still the gold of new-minted coins, while the other unicorns had horns more like the color of the full moon.

If Wishart listened only to the sound of the Ocean, and Tartary listened only to the Lady, Infanta heard the sounds of the earth growing: grass and leaves and timothy in the fields. She could distinguish between oak and ash on the rise, though the sound of rowan growing made her tremble all over.

And the Lady? She was old but she never seemed to age. Except her eyes, which were once the deep, rich blue of a Spring sky and were now faded like the skies over Winter.

Now the way that trouble came to the garden was this. It was a small thing, but the Lady should have known that small things carry the greatest dangers. Didn't a tiny viper bite the heel of the hero and bring him low? Didn't ants tunnel through the great walls of Cathay and grind whole sections to dust?

For the first time in years — in centuries, actually — there was a strange

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sound outside one of the gates in the wall. Those gates, normally so overgrown with bramble hedge and briar on the World's side and so besieged by the Ocean on the other, needed no guards or wards. In fact, the Lady and the unicorns scarcely remembered from one year to the next that the gates existed. But this one lambent spring day, right after the hour's rain, there was something rather like the wailing of a discontented child by the Northeastern gate. No, *exactly* like the wailing of a discontented child. The wailing went on from the moment the rain ended until quite past tea time, or about three hours. At that point, Infanta stomped three times with her left fore foot and shook her head until the white mane flew about as light as milkweed milk.

"What *is* that noise?" she asked.

Neither Tartary — who listened to the Lady — or Wishart — who listened only to the sea — bothered to answer. But Infanta asked anyway. "It is louder than grass growing. Louder than a gully full of Queen Anne's Lace and campion. Louder even than the bursting open of marigolds, which is very loud, indeed." And she went to complain directly to the Lady, who had heard the sound already.

"If I didn't know any better," said the Lady, "I would say it is a child — and a very young child at that — lying in a reed basket washed up upon the Ocean's small shingle." And because the Lady was blessed with a certain amount of prescience, which is another way of saying she could see a bit into the future, Infanta knew exactly what they would find.

The Lady sent one of her most trusted winds to leap over the wall and report back. It was a very small wind, hardly more than a breeze, really. When it returned, it reported in a voice made sweet with baby's breath and tart with brine. "It is a very young child lying in a basket."

"A reed basket," the Lady said, a great deal of satisfaction in her voice.

"Well, nettles and linen, actually," the breeze answered. Breezes, for all they are lightweight, insist on being factual. It is the habit of preachers and politicians as well.

The Lady made a face at the breeze. She hated making any kind of mistake. But then she smiled at the breeze because it had, after all, merely been reporting, not making judgments. And then the Lady instructed slightly larger breezes to waft their gauzy shifts together and make a rope to hook through the handles of the basket. In this way the child was raised up and over the wall and into the garden proper.

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And that, you see, was the Beginning of the End.

THE CHILD was a boy. That was evident at once. And he was hungry. That, too, was evident. But whose child he was or why he was there at all, those questions could not be answered, not even by the Lady. Indeed those questions were *never* to be answered, but by tea time the next day it didn't matter because by then they were all thoroughly besotted with him.

Infanta was the first to fall under his spell, when he raised his little hand up to her mane and tangled his chubby fingers in it.

The next to fall was Tartary. "He has," she cooed to the Lady, "your voice." By which she meant she was listening to him, though not really hearing him, for certainly the baby did not have the Lady's voice at all, hers being low and rounded and full, and his just being full.

Wishart actually held out the longest, until the breezes lifted the child onto his back. The baby crowed his delight, and if you could at that moment have seen the look in Wishart's old pearly eyes, you would have been sure they had turned to oceans themselves. He trotted around the inner path, past the herb gardens, stepping over rockery plants with a lightness he hadn't shown in years.

The Lady changed the baby's clothes and fed him pap she mixed herself, and wiped both his face and his bottom as if that were something she had always wanted to do. And she sang to him as she cleaned, songs like "Dance to Thy Daddy, My Little Laddie," and "Trot, Trot to Boston," which hadn't even been invented yet. And "Western Wind," which had.

Eventually, after months of squabbling, they settled on Waverly as his name.

"Because the waves brought him," the Infanta said, looking down fondly into his crib.

As long as Waverly was a baby and then a child, there was no trouble in the Lady's garden. After all, except for uprooting some of the slighter plants — to see what held them to the ground — Waverly was a good boy, if overly curious. Of course curiosity was not something either the Lady or the unicorns really understood. But they realized, if somewhat begrudgingly, that curiosity would serve young Waverly in his education, and so they did not

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stifle it.

By the time he was ten and had gone through "What's that?" and "Why's that?" and on to "Why not?" however, they had all begun to lose patience with him. With their sense of time, it seemed that only yesterday they had drawn baby Waverly up from the basket, though to Waverly it was ages and ages earlier.

Where, they wondered, *is the sweet-smelling, charming, compliant infant we fell in love with? And who is this loud, boisterous, dirty boy who has taken his place?* And slowly, though they certainly didn't mean to, they all fell out of love with him. Just a little.

Just enough.

Now Waverly did not know what was happening, but he certainly felt that something was. One moment everyone — Lady and unicorns and breezes — had all been lovely to him, giving him whatever he asked for and praising him. And then suddenly they said "No!" all the time. "No, you cannot make a fortress in the rockery garden." "No, you cannot put a house up in the apple tree." "No, you cannot scale the wall." "No, you cannot...must not...shall not...may not..." to everything that seemed even the slightest bit interesting or exciting or dangerous.

So Waverly did what every child at ten does. He did it all anyway.

Neither the Lady nor the unicorns knew the slightest thing about giving out punishments. It was not in their makeup. So they did what they had done before Waverly had ever arrived. Wishart started listening only to the sound of the sea. Tartary listened only to the Lady's voice. Infanta listened only to the sounds of the earth growing. And the Lady — she worked in the garden, she kept the great house clean, and she spoke to Waverly only when forced to. When forced to say, once again, "No!"

So it should not have been surprising — though it was — that on the morning of Waverly's sixteenth birthday (or at least the morning of the anniversary of the sixteenth year he had been drawn up out of the sea) they were all awakened by the sound of loud chopping. When they got out to the garden, there was Waverly, an axe in hand. He had just finished cutting down the apple tree and hollowing it into a boat.

"A boat?" the Lady asked for she knew right away what he was doing, her prescience working as well as her eyes. "And where did you learn about

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boats?"

"Where I learned about the Ocean and where I learned about the World," Waverly answered sensibly. "In your library."

"But the apple tree is the oldest thing of all," the Lady said.

"And I am the newest," Waverly said. "Would you have had me make a boat from stone?"

"We wouldn't have you make a boat at all," the Lady said. "Would we?" she asked the unicorns.

Wishart did not answer, for he was listening only to the sea which was issuing a strange siren call. Tartary did not answer, for she was waiting for the Lady's answer. And Infanta was too busy weeping over the demise of the apple tree.

Still, they didn't stop the boy, because he was already halfway through building the boat. And besides, they didn't know how.

It took him three days to make the boat and rig a sail, just as he had seen in one of the books in the Lady's library. And that very night, without so much as a goodbye, he was gone with the boat over the wall. They had no idea how he had managed; they had no idea he was so resourceful.

The Lady mourned his leaving in her own way, digging up plants and moving them about, the autumn crocuses three times until they died from all the changes.

Tartary and Infanta wandered disconsolately about, their heads so low they plowed furrows in the soil with their horns. But for the longest time, it looked as if Wishart hadn't even noticed the boy was gone. He just listened, ever more intently, at the Northeastern gate to the sounds of the sea.

And then one morning, a gale blowing out upon the Ocean, Wishart roused in a sudden and inexplicable fury and beat upon the gate with his feet and plunged his horn again and again into the wood. At last the gate broke open from the savage attack, swung wide, and in rushed the angry sea.

The waters covered the garden and the house. The Lady and the unicorns were swept away in a great swirl of foam as pearly white as horn. And after the waters settled again, all that could be seen was the topmost part of the Southwestern gate, the one closest to the World. And there, at low tide ever after, a black-backed gull sat, turning its head curiously at each passing breeze.

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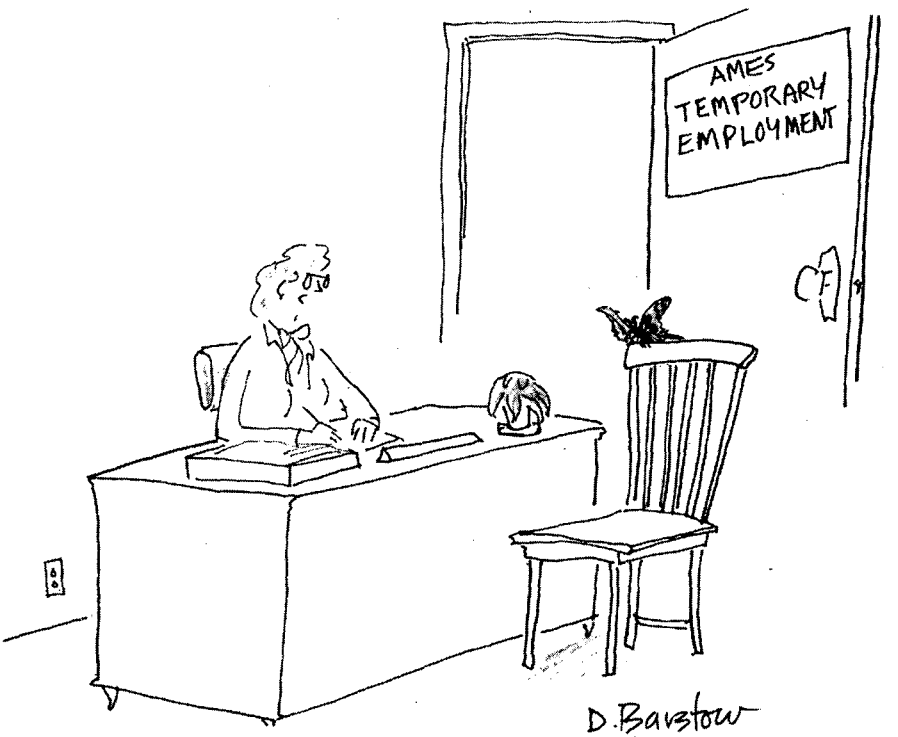
Of course that is not entirely the end of the story. I could not bear if that were so. Wishart and Tartary and Infanta became the very first narwhales, of course, those wonderful sleek whales with the long, twisting single horns.

The Lady built a new garden, this one under the Ocean, with bright anemones clinging to coral beds, like rockeries.

And Waverly, in the shape of a porpoise, comes to visit them every day and twice on Tuesdays, as regular as clockwork. Or so I like to think. And since this is my story, that is the way of it. If you think there is a different ending, you will have to tell it yourself.



"Oh, no problem. Most of our jobs last only one or two days anyway."

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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

THE NEW CRYPTOGRAPHY

WRITING IS a medium of communication and understanding, but there are times and places when one wants an entirely different function from writing: concealment and deliberate bafflement.

Cryptography, the science of secret writing, is almost as old as writing itself. The hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt were deliberately arcane: both writing and a cypher. Literacy in ancient Egypt was hedged about with daunting difficulty, so as to assure the elite powers of priest and scribe.

Ancient Assyria also used cryptography, including the unique and curious custom of "funerary cryptography." Assyrian tombs sometimes featured odd sets of cryptographic cuneiform symbols. The Assyrian passerby, puzzling out the import of the text, would mutter the syllables aloud, and find himself accidentally uttering a blessing for the dead. Funerary cryptography was a way to steal a prayer from passing strangers.

Julius Caesar lent his name to the famous "Caesar cypher," which he used to secure Roman military and political communications.

Modern cryptographic science is deeply entangled with the science of computing. In 1949, Claude Shannon, the pioneer of information theory, gave cryptography its theoretical foundation by establishing the "entropy" of a message and a formal measurement for the "amount of information" encoded in any stream of digital bits. Shannon's theories brought new power and sophistication to the codebreaker's historic efforts. After Shannon, digital machinery could pore tirelessly and repeatedly over the stream of encrypted gibberish, looking for repetitions, structures, coincidences, any slight

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variation from the random that could serve as a weak point for attack.

Computer pioneer Alan Turing, mathematician and proponent of the famous "Turing Test" for artificial intelligence, was a British cryptographer in the 1940s. In World War II, Turing and his colleagues in espionage used electronic machinery to defeat the elaborate mechanical wheels and gearing of the German Enigma code-machine. Britain's secret triumph over Nazi communication security had a very great deal to do with the eventual military triumph of the Allies. Britain's code-breaking triumph further assured that cryptography would remain a state secret and one of the most jealously guarded of all sciences.

After World War II, cryptography became, and has remained, one of the crown jewels of the American national security establishment. In the United States, the science of cryptography became the high-tech demesne of the National Security Agency (NSA), an extremely secretive bureaucracy that President Truman founded by executive order in 1952, one of the chilliest years of the Cold War.

Very little can be said with surety about the NSA. The very existence of the organization was not publicly confirmed until 1962. The first appearance of an NSA director before Congress was in 1975. The NSA is said to be based in Fort Meade, Maryland. It is said to have a budget much larger than that of the CIA, but this is impossible to determine since the budget of the NSA has never been a matter of public record. The NSA is said to the the largest single employer of mathematicians in the world. The NSA is estimated to have about 40,000 employees. The acronym NSA is aptly said to stand for "Never Say Anything."

The NSA almost never says anything publicly. However, the NSA's primary role in the shadow-world of electronic espionage is to protect the communications of the US government, and crack those of the US government's real, imagined, or potential adversaries. Since this list of possible adversaries includes practically everyone, the NSA is determined to defeat every conceivable cryptographic technique. In pursuit of its institutional goal, the NSA labors (in utter secrecy) to crack codes and cyphers and invent its own less breakable ones.

The NSA also tries hard to retard civilian progress in the science of cryptography outside its own walls. The NSA can suppress cryptographic inventions through the little-known but often-used Invention Secrecy Act

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of 1952, which allows the Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks to withhold patents on certain new inventions and to order that those inventions be kept secret indefinitely, "as the national interest requires." The NSA also seeks to control dissemination of information about cryptography, and to control and shape the flow and direction of civilian scientific research in the field.

Cryptographic devices are formally defined as "munitions" by Title 22 of the United States Code, and are subject to the same import and export restrictions as arms, ammunition, and other instruments of warfare. Violation of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) is a criminal affair investigated and administered by the Department of State. It is said that the Department of State relies heavily on NSA expert advice in determining when to investigate and/or criminally prosecute illicit cryptography cases (though this too is impossible to prove).

The "munitions" classification for cryptographic devices applies not only to physical devices such as telephone scramblers, but also to "related technical data" such as software and mathematical encryption algorithms. This specifically includes scientific "information" that can be "exported" in all manner of ways, including simply verbally discussing cryptography techniques out loud. One does not have to go overseas and set up shop to be regarded by the Department of State as a criminal international arms trafficker. The security ban specifically covers disclosing such information to any foreign national anywhere, including within the borders of the United States.

These ITAR restrictions have come into increasingly harsh conflict with the modern realities of global economics and everyday real life in the sciences and academia. Over a third of the grad students in computer science on American campuses are foreign nationals. Strictly applied ITAR regulations would prevent communication on cryptography, inside an American campus, between faculty and students. Most scientific journals have at least a few foreign subscribers, so an exclusively "domestic" publication about cryptography is also practically impossible. Even writing the data down on a cocktail napkin could be hazardous: the world is full of photocopiers, modems and fax machines, all of them linked to satellites and undersea fiber-optic cables.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the NSA used its surreptitious influence at the National Science Foundation to

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shape scientific research on cryptography through restricting grants to mathematicians. Scientists reacted mulishly, so in 1978 the Public Cryptography Study Group was founded as an interface between mathematical scientists in civilian life and the cryptographic security establishment. This Group established a series of "voluntary control" measures, the upshot being that papers by civilian researchers would be vetted by the NSA well before any publication.

This was one of the oddest situations in the entire scientific enterprise, but the situation was tolerated for years. Most US civilian cryptographers felt, through patriotic conviction, that it was in the best interests of the United States if the NSA remained far ahead of the curve in cryptographic science. After all, were some other national government's electronic spies to become more advanced than those of the NSA, then American government and military transmissions would be cracked and penetrated. World War II had proven that the consequences of a defeat in the cryptographic arms race could be very dire indeed for the loser.

So the "voluntary restraint" measures worked well for over a decade. Few mathematicians were so enamored of the doctrine of academic freedom that they were prepared to fight the National Security Agency over their supposed right to invent codes that could baffle the US government. In any case, the mathematical cryptography community was a small group without much real political clout, while the NSA was a vast, powerful, well-financed agency unaccountable to the American public, and reputed to possess many deeply shadowed avenues of influence in the corridors of power.

However, as the years rolled on, the electronic exchange of information became commonplace, and users of computer data became intensely aware of their necessity for electronic security over transmissions and data. One answer was physical security — protect the wiring, keep the physical computers behind a physical lock and key. But as personal computers spread and computer networking grew ever more sophisticated, widespread and complex, this bar-the-door technique became unworkable.

The volume and importance of information transferred over the Internet was increasing by orders of magnitude. But the Internet was a notoriously leaky channel of information — its packet-switching technology meant that packets of vital information might be dumped into the machines of unknown parties at almost any time. If the Internet itself

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could not be locked up and made leakproof — and this was impossible by the nature of the system — then the only secure solution was to encrypt the message itself, to make that message unusable and unreadable, even if it sometimes fell into improper hands.

Computers outside the Internet were also at risk. Corporate computers faced the threat of computer-intrusion hacking, from bored and reckless teenagers, or from professional snoops and unethical business rivals both inside and outside the company. Electronic espionage, especially industrial espionage, was intensifying. The French secret services were especially bold in this regard, as American computer and aircraft executives found to their dismay as their laptops went missing during Paris air and trade shows. Transatlantic commercial phone calls were routinely tapped by French government spooks seeking commercial advantage for French companies in the computer industry, aviation, and the arms trade. And the French were far from alone when it came to government-supported industrial espionage.

Protection of private civilian data from foreign government spies required that seriously powerful encryption techniques be placed into private hands. Unfortunately, an ability to baffle French spies also meant an ability to baffle American spies. This was not good news for the NSA.

By 1993, encryption had become big business. There were one and a half million copies of legal encryption software publicly available, including widely known and commonly used personal computer products such as Norton Utilities, Lotus Notes, StuffIt, and several Microsoft products. People all over the world, in every walk of life, were using computer encryption as a matter of course. They were securing hard disks from spies or thieves, protecting certain sections of the family computer from sticky-fingered children, or rendering entire laptops and portables into a solid mess of powerfully-encrypted Sanskrit, so that no stranger could walk off with those accidental but highly personal life-histories that are stored in almost every PowerBook.

People were no longer afraid of encryption. Encryption was no longer secret, obscure, and arcane; encryption was a business tool. Computer users wanted more encryption, faster, sleeker, more advanced, and better.

The real wild-card in the mix, however, was the new cryptography. A new technique arose in the 1970s: public-key cryptography. This was an element the codemasters of World

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War II and the Cold War had never foreseen.

Public-key cryptography was invented by American civilian researchers Whitfield Diffie and Martin Hellman, who first published their results in 1976.

Conventional classical cryptographic systems, from the Caesar cipher to the Nazi Enigma machine defeated by Alan Turing, require a single key. The sender of the message uses that key to turn his plain text message into cyphertext gibberish. He shares the key secretly with the recipients of the message, who use that same key to turn the cyphertext back into readable plain text.

This is a simple scheme; but if the key is lost to unfriendly forces such as the ingenious Alan Turing, then all is lost. The key must therefore always remain hidden, and it must always be fiercely protected from enemy cryptanalysts. Unfortunately, the more widely that key is distributed, the more likely it is that some user in on the secret will crack or fink. As an additional burden, the key cannot be sent by the same channel as the communications are sent, since the key itself might be picked up by eavesdroppers.

In the new public-key cryptography, however, there are two keys. The first is a key for writing secret text, the second the key for reading that text. The keys are related to one another through a complex mathematical dependency; they determine one another, but it is mathematically extremely difficult to deduce one key from the other.

The user simply gives away the first key, the "public key," to all and sundry. The public key can even be printed on a business card, or given away in mail or in a public electronic message. Now anyone in the public, any random personage who has the proper (not secret, easily available) cryptographic software, can use that public key to send the user a cyphertext message. However, that message can only be read by using the second key — the private key, which the user always keeps safely in his own possession.

Obviously, if the private key is lost, all is lost. But only one person knows that private key. That private key is generated in the user's home computer, and is never revealed to anyone but the very person who created it.

To reply to a message, one has to use the public key of the other party. This means that a conversation between two people requires four keys. Before computers, all this key-juggling would have been rather unwieldy, but with computers, the chips

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and software do all the necessary drudgework and number-crunching.

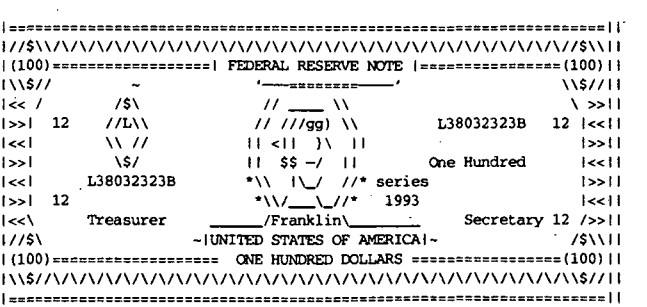
The public/private dual keys have an interesting alternate application. Instead of the public key, one can use one's private key to encrypt a message. That message can then be read by anyone with the public key, i.e,. pretty much everybody, so it is no longer a "secret" message at all. However, that message, even though it is no longer secret, now has a very valuable property: it is authentic. Only the individual holder of the private key could have sent that message.

This authentication power is a crucial aspect of the new cryptography, and may prove to be more socially important than secrecy. Authenticity means that electronic promises can be made, electronic proofs can be established, electronic contracts can be signed, electronic documents can be made tamperproof. Electronic impostors and fraudsters can be foiled and defeated — and it is possible for someone you have never seen, and will never see, to prove his bona fides through entirely electronic means.

That means that economic relations can become electronic. Theoretically, it means that digital cash is possible — that electronic mail, e-mail, can be joined by a strange and powerful new cousin, electronic cash, e-money.

Money that is made out of text — encrypted text. At first consideration such money doesn't seem possible, since it is so far outside our normal experience. But look at this: [See bottom of page —ed.]

This parody US banknote made of mere letters and numbers is being circulated in e-mail as an in-joke in network circles. But electronic money, once established, would be no more a joke than any other kind of money. Imagine that you could store a text in your computer and send it to a recipient; and that once gone, it would be gone from your computer



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forever, and registered infallibly in his. With the proper use of the new encryption and authentication, this is actually possible. Odder yet, it is possible to make the note itself an authentic, usable, fungible, transferrable note of genuine economic value, without the identity of its temporary owner ever being made known to anyone. This would be electronic cash — like normal cash, anonymous — but unlike normal cash, lightning-fast and global in reach.

There is already a great deal of electronic funds transfer occurring in the modern world, everything from gigantic currency-exchange clearing-houses to the individual's VISA and MASTERCARD bills. However, charge-card funds are not so much "money" per se as a purchase via proof of personal identity. Merchants are willing to take VISA and MASTERCARD payments because they know that they can physically find the owner in short order and, if necessary, force him to pay up in a more conventional fashion. The VISA and MASTERCARD user is considered a good risk because his identity and credit history is known.

VISA and MASTERCARD also have the power to accumulate potentially damaging information about the commercial habits of individuals; for instance, the video stores one patronizes, the bookstores one frequents, the restaurants one dines in, or one's travel habits and one's choice of company.

Digital cash could be very different. With proper protection from the new cryptography, even the world's most powerful governments would be unable to find the owner and user of digital cash. That cash would be secured by a "bank" — (it needn't be a conventional, legally established bank) — through the use of an encrypted digital signature from the bank, a signature that neither the payer nor the payee could break.

The bank could register the transaction. The bank would know that the payer had spent the e-money, and the bank could prove that the money had been spent once and only once. But the bank would not know that the payee had gained the money spent by the payer. The bank could track the electronic funds themselves, but not their location or their ownership. The bank would guarantee the worth of the digital cash, but the bank would have no way to tie the transactions together.

The potential therefore exists for a new form of network economics made of nothing but ones and zeroes, placed beyond anyone's controls by the very laws of mathematics. Whether this will actually happen is

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anyone's guess. It seems likely that if it did happen, it would prove extremely difficult to stop.

Public-key cryptography uses prime numbers. It is a swift and simple matter to multiply prime numbers together and obtain a result, but it is an exceedingly difficult matter to take a large number and determine the prime numbers used to produce it. The RSA algorithm, the commonest and best-tested method in public-key cryptography, uses 256-bit and 258-bit prime numbers. These two large prime numbers ("p" and "q") are used to produce very large numbers ("d" and "e") so that (de-1) is divisible by (p-1) times (q-1). These numbers are easy to multiply together, yielding the public key, but extremely difficult to pull apart mathematically to yield the private key.

To date, there has been no way to mathematically prove that it is inherently difficult to crack this prime-number cipher. It might be very easy to do if one knew the proper advanced mathematical technique for it, and the clumsy brute-power techniques for prime-number factorization have been improving in past years. However, mathematicians have been working steadily on prime number factorization problems for many centuries, with few dramatic advances. An advance that could shatter the RSA algorithm would mean an explosive breakthrough across a broad front of mathematical science. This seems intuitively unlikely, so prime-number public keys seem safe and secure for the time being — as safe and secure as any other form of cryptography short of "the one-time pad." (The one-time pad is a truly unbreakable cypher. Unfortunately it requires a key that is every bit as long as the message, and that key can only be used once. The one-time pad is solid as Gibraltar, but it is not much practical use.)

Prime-number cryptography has another advantage. The difficulty of factorizing numbers becomes drastically worse as the prime numbers become larger. A 56-bit key is, perhaps, not entirely outside the realm of possibility for a nationally supported decryption agency with large banks of dedicated supercomputers and plenty of time on their hands. But a 2,048 bit key would require every computer on the planet to number-crunch for hundreds of centuries.

Decrypting a public-keyed message is not so much a case of physical impossibility, as a matter of economics. Each key requires a huge computational effort to break it, and there are already thousands of such keys used by thousands of people. As a further blow against the decryptor,

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the users can generate new keys easily, and change them at will. This poses dire problems for the professional electronic spy.

The best-known public-key encryption technique, the RSA algorithm, was named after its inventors, Ronald L. Rivest, Adi Shamir and Leon Adleman. The RSA technique was invented in the United States in the late 1980s (although, as if to spite the international trade in arms regulations, Shamir himself is an Israeli). The RSA algorithm is patented in the United States by the inventors, and the rights to implement it on American computers are theoretically patented by an American company known as Public Key Partners. (Due to a patent technicality, the RSA algorithm was not successfully patented overseas.)

In 1991 an amateur encryption enthusiast named Phil Zimmerman wrote a software program called "Pretty Good Privacy" that used the RSA algorithm without permission. Zimmerman gave the program away on the Internet network via modem from his home in Colorado, because of his private conviction that the public had a legitimate need for powerful encryption programs at no cost (and, incidentally, no profit to the inventors of RSA). Since Zimmerman's action, "Pretty Good Privacy" or "PGP" has come into common use for encrypting electronic mail and data, and has won an avid international following. The original PGP program has been extensively improved by other software writers overseas, out of the reach of American patents or the influence of the NSA, and the PGP program is now widely available in almost every country on the planet — or at least, in all those countries where floppy disks are common household objects.

Zimmerman, however, failed to register as an arms dealer when he wrote the PGP software in his home and made it publicly available. At this writing, Zimmerman is under federal investigation by the Office of Defense Trade Controls at the State Department, and is facing a possible criminal indictment as an arms smuggler. This despite the fact that Zimmerman was not, in fact, selling anything, but rather giving software away for free. Nor did he voluntarily "export" anything — rather, people reached in from overseas via Internet links and retrieved Zimmerman's program from the United States under their own power and through their own initiative.

Even more oddly, Zimmerman's program does not use the RSA algorithm exclusively, but also depends on the perfectly legal DES or Data

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Encryption Standard. The Data Encryption Standard, which uses a 56-bit classical key, is an official federal government cryptographic technique, created by IBM with the expert help of the NSA. It has long been surmised, though not proven, that the NSA can crack DES at will with their legendary banks of Cray supercomputers. Recently a Canadian mathematician, Michael Wiener of Bell-Northern Research, published plans for a DES decryption machine that can purportedly crack 56-bit DES in a matter of hours, through brute force methods. It seems that the US Government's official 56-bit key — insisted upon, reportedly, by the NSA — is now too small for serious security uses.

The NSA, and the American law enforcement community generally, are unhappy with the prospect of privately owned and powerfully secure encryption. They acknowledge the need for secure communications, but they insist on the need for police oversight, police wiretapping, and on the overwhelming importance of national security interests and governmental supremacy in the making and breaking of cyphers.

This motive recently led the Clinton Administration to propose the "Clipper Chip" or "Skipjack," a government-approved encryption device to be placed in telephones. Sets of keys for the Clipper Chip would be placed in escrow with two different government agencies, and when the FBI felt the need to listen in on an encrypted telephone conversation, the FBI would get a warrant from a judge and the keys would be handed over.

Enthusiasts for private encryption have pointed out a number of difficulties with the Clipper Chip proposal. First of all, it is extremely unlikely that criminals, foreign spies, or terrorists would be foolish enough to use an encryption technique designed by the NSA and approved by the FBI. Second, the main marketing use for encryption is not domestic American encryption, but international encryption. Serious business users of serious encryption are far more alarmed by state-supported industrial espionage overseas, than they are about the safety of phone calls made inside the United States. They want encryption for communications made overseas to people overseas — but few foreign business people would buy an encryption technology knowing that the US Government held the exclusive keys.

It is therefore likely that the Clipper Chip could never be successfully exported by American manufacturers of telephone and computer

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equipment, and therefore it could not be used internationally, which is the primary market for encryption. Machines with a Clipper Chip installed would become commercial white elephants, with no one willing to use them but American cops, American spies, and Americans with nothing to hide.

A third objection is that the Skipjack algorithm has been classified "Secret" by the NSA and is not available for open public testing. Skeptics are very unwilling to settle for a bland assurance from the NSA that the chip and its software are unbreakable except with the official keys.

The resultant controversy was described by Business Week as "Spy Vs Computer Nerd." A subterranean power-struggle has broken out over the mastery of cryptographic science, and over basic ownership of the electronic bit-stream.

Much is riding on the outcome.

Will powerful, full-fledged, state-of-the-art encryption belong to individuals, including such unsavory individuals as drug traffickers, child pornographers, black-market criminal banks, tax evaders, software pirates, and the possible future successors of the Nazis?

Or will the NSA and its allies in the cryptographic status-quo somehow succeed in stopping the march of scientific progress in cryptography, and in cramming the commercial crypto-genie back into the bottle? If so, what price will be paid by society, and what damage wreaked on our traditions of free scientific and technical inquiry?

One thing seems certain: cryptography, this most obscure and smothered of mathematical sciences, is out in the open as never before in its long history. Impassioned, radicalized cryptographic enthusiasts, often known as "cypherpunks," are suing the NSA and making it their business to spread knowledge of cryptographic techniques as widely as possible, "through whatever means necessary." Small in number, they nevertheless have daring, ingenuity, and money, and they know very well how to create a public stink. In the meantime, their more conventional suit-and-tie allies in the Software Publishers Association grumble openly that the Clipper Chip is a poorly conceived fiasco, that cryptographic software is peddled openly all over the planet, and that "the US Government is succeeding only in crippling an American industry's exporting ability."

The NSA confronted the worst that America's adversaries had to offer during the Cold War, and the NSA prevailed. Today, however, the se-

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cret masters of cryptography find themselves confronting what are perhaps the two most powerful forces in American society: the computer revolution, and the profit motive. Deeply hidden from the American public through forty years of Cold War terror, the NSA itself is for the first time exposed to open question and harrowing reassessment.

Will the NSA quietly give up the struggle, and expire as secretly and silently as it lived its forty-year Cold War existence? Or will this most phantomlike of federal agencies decide to fight for its survival and its scientific pre-eminence?

And if this odd and always-secret agency does choose to fight the new cryptography, then — how?

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Mary Rosenblum's second novel, Chimera, *appeared last fall from Del Rey. Her third will be published this fall. Because she has turned her attention to novels, her short stories are rarer, and that makes them ever more precious. We are lucky to have this gentle sf piece.*

"'California Dreamer' was born on a trip to San Francisco some time ago," she writes. "I visited the Marina district where the worst of the earthquake damage occurred. All the debris and burned-out buildings had been cleared away. The streets were clean and empty. Most of the buildings were still unsafe, so it was a small ghost town within the rush of downtown San Francisco. I found it very eerie to walk down those empty streets and see the glyphs the rescue teams had scrawled on the doors and walls. Searched. No bodies....

"Those quiet streets disturbed me more than the media scenes of fire and death had done. Perhaps it was because evidence of such tragedy lurked beneath a skin of normalcy.... 'California Dreamer' grew from that..... I began to wonder just how deep and far reaching the effects of human cataclysm might be."

California Dreamer

By Mary Rosenblum

THE RELIEF BOAT CAME ONCE a week. This morning it had been a sturdy salmon fisher, hired down from Oregon. The crew had unloaded the usual relief supplies; canned milk and shrink-wrapped cheese, cans of peanut butter and stuff like that. It had unloaded mail.

Mail. Letters. Junk mail, for God's sake. No power yet, no telephones, but the US Postal Service had come through. Neither rain nor snow nor earthquake... Ellen struggled to swallow the hurting lump in her throat as she walked slowly homeward. Back on the beach — the new, Wave-scoured beach — people were sorting through envelopes and catalogues and cards. Crying and laughing. Britty Harris had gone into hysterics over a postcard from her vacationing brother. *Wish you were here,* he had scrawled on the back of a glossy picture of Fisherman's Wharf.

Wish you were here. Neither Fisherman's Wharf nor her brother were there anymore.

There had been no ghost mail from Rebecca. The lump swelled, threat-

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ening to turn into more tears. Ellen ducked her head and walked faster. Her shadow stretched seaward; a tall, thin caricature of herself. Perhaps she was *becoming* a caricature; turned hollow and surreal by the force of the Quake. Changed.

Beanpole, Rebecca had called her, and said, *Why can't I be thin like you?* at least once a week. Then Ellen would tell her to quit eating so much junk food and Rebecca would call her a Jewish mother and they would both laugh, because Scandinavian-blonde Ellen had grown up Catholic, and Rebecca *was* Jewish. It had been a ritual between them — a lightly spoken touchstone of love. As she turned up the walkway to the house, the unshed tears settled into Ellen's stomach, hard as beach pebbles.

It was a cottage, more than a house. Weathered gray shingles, weathered gray roof. Rebecca's house, because she'd always wanted to live near the sea, even though she had called it *ours.* Scraggly geraniums bloomed in a pot on the tiny front porch. The pot — generic red earthenware — was cracked. Ellen had watched it crack, clinging to this very railing as the earth shuddered and the house groaned in a choir of terrifying voices.

Earthquake, Ellen had thought in surprise. *That's not supposed to happen* here.

They'd heard it was the Big One on Jack's generator-run radio. But it was only after the relief boats started coming that they got to see the news photos of San Francisco and L.A. Ellen stomped sand from her shoes on the three wooden steps, went inside. A long worktable filled half of the single main room. Boxes of beads, feathers, and assorted junk cluttered the floor, and unfinished collages leaned against the wall. Rebecca's workspace. Rebecca's *life.* The room looked...unfamiliar. The Quake had changed everything, had charged the air with something like electricity. Angles and familiar lines looked sharp and strange and new, as if the unleashed force had transformed flowerpots and people and houses on some subtle, molecular scale.

Ellen set the bundled mail down on the stained formica of the kitchen counter and worked one of the rubber bands loose. Bank statements. Mail order catalogues, bright with spring dresses and shoes. A sale flyer from an art supply dealer. The second rubber band snapped as Ellen slid her fingers beneath it. The unexpected sting filled her eyes with tears. They spilled over and ran down her cheeks. She sobbed once, clutching the stupid, useless envelopes, fighting the tide that would rise up if she let it, and sweep her away.

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Mail. It meant that Rebecca was dead. Ellen's tears made round, wrinkled spots on a glossy sportswear catalogue. All these endless weeks, she had told herself that Rebecca had survived, had cowered in the safety of some doorway or park while San Francisco dissolved in rubble and flame. She had told herself that Rebecca was in some schoolhouse shelter, frantic with worry because she couldn't call. As long as Ellen believed this—as long as she really — *believed* — then, Rebecca was alive.

How could you believe in a miracle, with a sportswear catalogue in your hands?

I have never lived without Rebecca, Ellen thought in terror.

That wasn't quite true. She had passed through childhood without Rebecca, had only met her in college. Rebecca had been struggling through art-majors' bio, as it was called. Ellen had helped her, because she was a bio major and Rebecca's outraged frustration made her laugh. *You need someone to take care of you,* Ellen had said lightly. They had moved in together a month later. Fifteen years ago. Ellen looked up at the cupboard above the sink.

The bottle of pills was up there, on the top shelf behind the glasses, with the aspirin and antacids. Sleeping pills, prescribed for Rebecca years ago, after she hurt her knee skiing. Would Ellen die if she took them all? She had a hard time swallowing capsules. They would stick to the back of her throat; hard, gelatinous lumps of oblivion. She would have to drink glasses of water to get them down.

Someone knocked on the door.

Rebecca? The traitorous rush of hope made her dizzy. "Coming!" Ellen flung the door open.

"Mom's sick." A girl stared up at her, dirty-faced, tousle-headed; a stranger. "Please come."

Not Rebecca. "Who are *you?*" Ellen said numbly. "Where did you come from?"

"I'm Beth. Our car ran out of gas and we got lost. Please hurry."

Ellen blinked at the girl. Eleven? Twelve? Gawky and blonde, but you noticed her eyes first. They were a strange color; depthless blue, like the sky after sunset.

"All right." Ellen sighed and stepped out onto the porch. "Take me to your mom."

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The girl turned unhesitatingly inland, trotting up through the scraggly spring grass toward the forested ridge above the cottage. "Wait a minute," Ellen called, but the girl didn't slow down, didn't even look back. Ellen hesitated, then ducked her head and broke into a run, was panting after only a dozen uphill yards, because Rebecca had run every morning and Ellen hadn't.

The girl crouched in the tree shadows, cradling a woman in her arms. The woman's face was flushed and she breathed in short, raspy breaths. Her hair stuck to her face, dark and stringy, as if she had been sweating, but when Ellen touched her cheek, her skin felt hot and dry.

"How long has your mother been sick?" Ellen asked the girl.

"A couple of days. It rained on us and it was cold. Mom let me wear her jacket, but then she started shivering."

"We've got to get her down to the house somehow." This was a crisis and Ellen could handle crises. She'd had fifteen years of practice, because Rebecca *didn't* handle them. She squatted beside the sick woman, shook her gently. "Can you wake up?"

Miraculously, the woman's eyelids fluttered.

"Come on, honey. Got to get you on your feet." Ellen slid her arm beneath the woman's shoulders.

Another miracle. The woman mumbled something incoherent and struggled to her feet. Ellen kept her arm around her, frightened by her fierce heat, supporting her. Step by step, she coaxed the woman down the slope, staggering like a drunk beneath her slack weight.

It took forever to reach the house, but they finally made it. Ellen put the woman into Rebecca's empty (forever, Oh God) bed. The rasp of her breathing scared Ellen. Pneumonia? In the old days, before antibiotics, people had died from flu and pneumonia. The Quake had smashed the comfortable present as it smashed through the California hills. It had warped time back on itself, had brought back the old days of candles and no roads and death from measles or cholera. Seal Cove had no doctor. Big chunks of the California coast had fallen into the sea and you couldn't *get* there from here.

"I'll walk down to the store." Ellen poured water into a bowl from the kitchen jug, got a clean washcloth down from the shelf. "Jack can call Eureka on the radio. They'll send a helicopter to take your mom to the hospital. I'm going to give her some aspirin and I want you to wipe her all over while I'm

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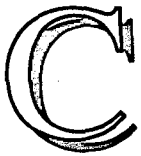
gone." She handed the washcloth to Beth. "We need to get her fever down."

"Okay." The girl looked up at Ellen, her eyes dark and fierce. "She'll be all right. I love her."

She'll be all right. I love her. That incantation hadn't saved Rebecca. Ellen swallowed. "What's your mom's name, honey?"

"Laura Sorenson." The girl dipped the folded washcloth into the water. "She'll get well. She *has* to."

Her hands were trembling as she wiped her mother's face. Ellen groped for reassuring words and found only emptiness. "I'll be back in a little while," she said.



CLOUDS WERE boiling up over the horizon again by the time Ellen returned to the house. The wind gusted onshore, whipping the waves, snatching wisps of spume from the gray curl of the breakers. There had been a lot of storms lately, as if the Quake's terrible power had been absorbed into the atmosphere, was being discharged in raging wind and waves.

"Jack called the relief people up in Eureka." Ellen flinched as the wind slammed the screen door behind her. "They'll send the helicopter for your mom, just as soon as it gets back in." If the weather didn't stop it. She closed the wooden door against the building storm. "How is she?"

"Asleep." Beth hovered protectively in the bedroom doorway. "Better, I think."

Ellen edged past her and bent over the bed. She was worse, struggling to breathe, burning with fever. The woman's eyelids fluttered and Ellen shivered. There was a disinterested glaze to her eyes; as if the woman was on a boat, watching a shoreline recede into the distance. She is dying, Ellen thought and shivered again. "Beth?" Distract her. "Come have something to eat, okay? I don't want you getting sick, too."

"If you want." Beth sat reluctantly at the kitchen table. "What a pretty woman." She nodded at the watercolor on the wall. "Did you paint it?" she asked with a child's transparent effort to be polite.

"No." Some art student had painted it, years ago. Rebecca was smiling, head tilted, one hand in her dark, thick, semitic hair that had just been starting to go gray. The student had caught the impatience, the *intensity* that kept her up all night working, sent her weeping into Ellen's bed in the dawn,

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full of exhaustion and triumph and doubts. *Tell me it's not awful,* she would whisper. *God, El, I need you.* "It's a picture of my friend." Ellen busied herself peeling back shrink-wrap and slicing the yellow block of salmon-boat cheese. "Is a cheese sandwich all right?"

"Fine."

Silence. The rasp of the dying woman's breathing filled the kitchen. "She was an artist," Ellen said too loudly. "She did collages. When they started selling, I quit my job and we moved out here." *You supported me,* Rebecca had said, grinning. *While I was a starving artist. Now you get to be my kept woman.* "I took care of her. She needed a full-time keeper when she was working."

Beth nodded politely, eyes on the bedroom door. "Where is she now?"

"She's dead." The words caught Ellen by surprise. "She was in...San Francisco. When the Quake happened." She set the plate of sandwiches down in front of Beth with a small thump, aware of the pill bottle up on the top shelf. "I'll get you some water."

"I'm really sorry." Beth touched her hand. "That your friend died."

"Me, too," Ellen whispered.

Storm wind whined around the corners of the house, banging a loose piece of gutter against the eaves. Shadows were creeping into the corners. She switched on the fluorescent lantern, hung it on its hook above the table. The shadows cast by its gentle swinging made the watercolor Rebecca smile, but her eyes looked sad. "In a hundred years, we'll have forgotten how California looked before the Quake," Ellen murmured. "Everything will seem so *normal.*"

"We lived in Berkeley." Beth lifted a corner of bread, stared at the yellow slab of cheese beneath. "We had an apartment near the doctor's office where Mom was a nurse. I was across the street telling Cara about Mr. Walther's giving me a referral at school and all of a sudden we fell down. I saw our building *sway,* like it was made out of rubber. Pieces cracked out of it and started falling. Cars were crashing into things and Cara was screaming. Her voice sounded so *small.* All you could hear was this giant roar. I thought...Mom was dead."

"She wasn't dead." Beth had won that terrible lottery and Ellen had lost. Outside, the wind rattled the screen door against its hook. Beth was trembling and Ellen's twinge of anger metamorphosed suddenly into sympa-

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thy. "C'mon, eat." She put her arm around Beth's shoulders. *Eat*, she had said a hundred times a week to Rebecca. *You can't live on corn chips and pop, you idiot.* "Take your time. I'll check on your mom," she said.

The lantern streaked Rebecca's bedroom with dim light and shadow. Beth's mother — Laura — lay still beneath the light sheet. She didn't react as Ellen wiped her hot face with a washcloth. Her breathing was shallow and uneven. Outside, wind fluttered the shingles with the sound of cards riffling in a giant hand. No helicopter would land to save her.

"Ellen?" Beth's butterfly touch made Ellen jump, raised gooseflesh on her arms. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me." Beth's face was pale. "You think she's dying."

Ellen opened her mouth, but the lie wouldn't come.

"She can't die," Beth whispered. "She *can't*. I need her."

Need couldn't save the one you loved. "Your mom's sleeping and you need some sleep, too." Ellen steered Beth firmly out of the room. "You can sleep in my bed tonight. I'll sit up with your mom."

"She'll be better when she wakes up." Beth's shoulders stiffened. "She *has* to be."

"I'm sure she will be," Ellen said, but Beth's eyes told her she knew the lie for what it was.

Ellen found an extra nightshirt and tucked Beth into her own bed. Such bitter, bitter irony, to survive the Quake just to die from the busy breeding of invisible bacteria. "Go to sleep," Ellen whispered. "Your mom will be fine."

"She was making fudge." Beth looked up at Ellen, golden hair spread across the pillow. "She always makes fudge on Wednesday, because Wednesday's her day off and fudge is our favorite thing in the whole world. The corner where our apartment is cracked and just fell down. This big chunk of concrete landed on a man and you couldn't even see what happened to him. Just dust, lots of dust. It hid everything and then there was smoke and fire and Cara was screaming that everyone was dead, that Mom was dead. She ran away, but I waited for the firetrucks. They didn't come and then the whole building fell in and Cara's building was on fire and I had to run away after all."

Terror filled those depthless eyes. "It's all right, honey." Ellen stroked her face. "Your mom got out, remember?"

"Cara was lying," Beth said shrilly. "She always lied. I knew Mom

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wasn't dead, but I couldn't find her. I saw a body lying in a pile of bricks. It was a man with black hair. He didn't have any pants on and one of his legs was gone. Some firemen in yellow coats told me they'd help me, but they didn't. They took me to this park and it wasn't even in Berkeley. There were tents and lots of people. I told them I couldn't stay, that I had to look for my mother, but they wouldn't listen to me. There was a fence around the park. And soldiers. They wouldn't let me out. They said that Mom would come look for me there, but how could she *know*?"

"She found you. She's right here, Beth." And dying. Ellen put her arms around the shaking girl, held her close, rocking her gently.

"I found *her*," Beth whispered. "We're going to Grandpa's house, up in Oregon. We'll be safe there. *You* think she's dying." Beth pushed Ellen away. "She's *not* dying. I won't let her die."

"There, there," Ellen soothed, but tears stung her eyes. "You sleep now." She kissed Beth gently on the forehead. "I'll take good care of your mom."

"She won't die." Beth turned onto her side and closed her eyes.

BUT SHE *was* dying. Ellen sat beside her bed, wiping her fever-hot body with the wet cloth. Had Rebecca's last moments been full of terror and pain? Had she bled to death, trapped under fallen ceilings and walls, or had she burned, screaming? Outside, the wind hurled itself inland, slamming against the house with the Quake's absorbed power, shaking it to its foundations. Ellen rinsed the cloth. It was warm with the woman's heat. She didn't look like Beth. She had dark hair and an olive tint to her skin. The lantern cast long shadows across the floor and something creaked in the main room. Rebecca's ghost?

Need shapes our lives, Ellen thought dully. Need for food, for attention, for power. The need for love. That's the foundation, the rock on which we build everything. "How can I live without Rebecca?" she whispered.

The woman's eyelids twitched. "Joseph?" she whispered. "Have to get back... Love...don't worry..." The feeble words fluttered to silence.

Joseph? Ellen wiped the woman's forehead. Beth's father? Beth hadn't mentioned a Joseph or a father.

Ellen woke to gray dawn light and the morning sounds of surf. Her head

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was pillowed on the sick woman's thigh and the wash cloth made a damp spot on the quilt. Afraid, Ellen jerked upright.

"Hello," Laura Sorenson whispered.

Still alive! "Good morning." Guilty and relieved, Ellen stifled a yawn. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. How are you feeling?"

"Tired. What...happened?"

"You're in my house. You've been sick." Ellen touched the woman's forehead. No fever. "Beth's here, too, and she's fine. Your daughter's a brave girl."

"Beth? I...don't have a daughter." She clutched weakly at the sheet. "Why did you call me Laura? That's not...my name."

"Just take it easy." Ellen patted Laura's shoulder, hiding dismay. "You had a high fever."

"Oh." Fear flickered in the woman's dark eyes. "Did I hit my head? What day is this? I feel as if...I've been dreaming for a long time."

"You were just sick," Ellen murmured. "It's March 25. Don't worry about it now. I'll get you some water, or would you rather have some orange juice?"

"March?" the woman whispered brokenly. "It *can't* be. Why can't I *remember*?"

In the kitchen, Ellen spooned orange crystals into a glass from a white can, trying to recall the effects of a prolonged high fever. Seizures, she remembered, but Laura hadn't gone into convulsions. Amnesia? Ellen shook her head, stirred the fake juice to orange froth. She carried the glass back to the bedroom and found Beth already there, her arms around her mother.

"Mom, it's *me*," Beth was saying in a broken voice.

"It's...coming back." Laura stroked her daughter's back. "Beth. Honey, it'll be all right."

There was a tentative quality to the gesture and a frightened expression in her eyes. "Here's your juice," Ellen said, holding out the glass. "How are you doing?"

Beth almost snatched the glass from Ellen's hand. "I told you she'd get well," she said.

Voyeur, outsider, Ellen watched Beth help her mother drink. Side by side, they looked even less alike. There was a protective possessiveness to Beth's posture; a confidence that was lacking in Laura. Beth might be the

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mother; Laura the fragile child.

"Thank you." The woman sank back on the pillows, trying for a smile. "Thank you for taking us in. We must be a horrible burden."

"Not at all." Ellen collected the empty glass. "I'm just glad you're better."

Laura stroked her daughter's hair. "Beth said I was in our apartment when it happened. I'm...starting to remember." She spoke hesitantly, like an actor groping for half-learned lines. "What about...Joseph? Oh...God, Joseph!"

"What's wrong? Who's Joseph, Mom?" Beth stroked a strand of hair back from her mother's face. "Someone at the office?"

"No. I...don't know. I don't know a Joseph, do I? It was a...dream, I guess. From the fever." She squeezed Beth's hand, her fingers trembling.

"You'll sort it out." Ellen touched Laura's shoulder, moved by the anguish in her face. "I've got to run into town." She had almost forgotten the helicopter. "I'll be back in an hour. There's more water in the jugs beside the kitchen counter."

Laura nodded weakly, but her eyes never left her daughter's face. She is afraid, Ellen thought.

Of what?

At the store, Jack eyed her over the fake tortoiseshell rim of his glasses as he called Eureka and canceled the helicopter. "They were busy anyway," he drawled. "Guess the storm hit real bad up there. Your visitor wasn't too sick, huh?"

Dumb woman, his expression said. *Don't know just sick from dying.*

"She was *dying,*" Ellen snapped, but she hadn't died, had she? "I guess I was wrong," she said lamely. "Thanks for calling Eureka." She turned away from Jack's cool, judgmental face. She had no real friends in this Godforsaken town. Ellen-and-Rebecca had been a complete and seamless universe. She could feel the shattered bits of that universe crunching beneath her feet. "I'd better get back," she said.

"Oh yeah." Jack crossed his arms on the top of the old-fashioned wood-and-glass counter. "Aaron McDevitt was in yesterday, to pick up his share of the food. He said he found a car up on the old logging road acrost Bear Ridge." He cleared his throat. "Aaron brought this in." He fished around behind the counter, laid a brown handbag on the scarred wood, put a woman's

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wallet down beside it. "Wasn't no money in it," he said.

Aaron would have made sure of that. Ellen picked up the leather wallet. The bag was leather, too. It looked expensive. She opened the wallet. Credit cards from stores and oil companies. A check guarantee card. All in the name of Julia DeMarco. Ellen started to say that it didn't belong to Laura, but she closed her mouth without speaking. Laura's dark, oval face smiled at her from a California driver's license.

Julia DeMarco?

"This is...her bag." Ellen folded up the wallet, stuffed it back into the bag. "I'll take it to her. Thanks," she said too quickly. "Thank Aaron, too, when you see him."

She left the store, feeling guilty, as if she was partner to some crime. There were hundreds of reasons to lie about your name — some good, lots of them bad. Ellen stopped at the bottom of her driveway and opened the bag again. It held the usual stuff; checkbook, wallet, makeup items and a leatherbound datebook. Ellen found a leather card case full of business cards, printed on creamy stock.

Julia DeMarco

Attorney at Law

The address was San Francisco. Beth had told Ellen that her mother was a nurse in Berkeley. The datebook listed court dates, appointments, and reminders to pick up dry cleaning or visit the dentist. Ellen paged through it. *Joseph's Birthday* was written neatly at the top of the page for next Wednesday. Joseph. A dream, Laura had said with her face full of anguish. Ellen stuffed everything back into the bag and hurried up the lane to the house.

Inside, the watercolor Rebecca glowed on the wall. Ellen tossed the bag onto the cluttered worktable and went into the bedroom.

"Hi." Laura smiled wanly at Ellen. "Beth went to get more water. She said she saw a pool up above the house."

"The spring." Ellen nodded. "That was nice of her."

"Beth's a good kid. She had to grow up a little too early. There was a divorce — a custody battle. I think...it was ugly. I think it...hurt Beth."

Again, the sense of lines being recited. "You're remembering?" Ellen asked.

"I don't know." Laura's eyes flickered. "I remember scenes or faces — and I don't know them, but I *do*. I'm not making any sense, am I?" Her laugh

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was fragile, edged with hysteria. "Did our building burn down? I remember it burning and...I remember picking up pieces of a broken vase and thinking how *lucky* I was. I keep wanting to remember that it was a house, but it was an apartment, wasn't it?"

Ellen took a quick breath. "Who's Julia DeMarco?"

"I...don't know. Do I?" Laura whispered. "Joseph...? Oh, God." She buried her face in her hands. "Why do I want to cry? What's *wrong* with me? I don't even know where we are or why we're *here.*"

"Take it easy." Ellen stroked Laura's back. "You'll straighten everything out eventually." Would she? Who *are* you? she wondered, but she didn't say it out loud.

"Hi, Mom." Beth stuck her head through the doorway, a wet jug in each hand. "What's wrong?" She dropped the jugs, ran to the bedside. "Mom, what's *wrong?*"

"Nothing...nothing." Laura straightened, struggling to smile for her daughter. "I'm still feeling...shaky."

"Oh, Mom." Beth clutched her mother. "You'll remember again. You have to."

"Of course I will, sweetheart." Laura buried her face in her daughter's hair. "It's all right, Beth. Really."

Was it? Ellen tiptoed out of the room. Perhaps it would be all right. Perhaps Laura Sorenson would wake up tomorrow and remember the burning apartment. And what about Julia DeMarco? What about Joseph? Not my business, Ellen told herself fiercely. Not at all. She got a pot down from the kitchen cupboard, filled it with water from the dripping jug.

"What are you doing?" Beth asked from the doorway.

"Fixing brunch."

"I'll help you." Beth perched herself on the table. "What can I do?"

"Nothing just yet." Ellen measured dusty flakes of oatmeal into the water. "Why were you going to your grandfather's house? Half the roads in the state are closed. Why didn't you and your mom stay in San Francisco?"

"We...couldn't."

Aha. "Why not?"

No answer.

Ellen lit the little white-gas camping stove, set the pot of oatmeal on to boil.

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"They wouldn't let me go," Beth spoke up suddenly. She sat rigidly straight, hands tucked beneath her thighs, eyes fixed on her knees. "I saw her one afternoon, but she was outside the fence and she didn't see me. When I told them, they said she was dead, that she'd died in our building. They said I'd have to wait for my father to come. He'd never let me go back to Mom. Never. The firemen told me they'd help me find Mom, but they lied. They just took me to that place." She looked at Ellen at last. "The man at the gate hit me, when I tried to run after her."

Such terrible eyes, dark as the Quake-storm yesterday. They were full of desperate need. Full of power. Power to tear apart the landscape of reality, to reshape it like the Quake had reshaped the hills? A hissing startled Ellen and she snatched her gaze away from those depthless eyes, grabbing a potholder. Sticky oatmeal foamed over the lip of the pot and bubbled down the side.

Oh, yes, she understood the power of need. Ellen stirred the boiling cereal, Rebecca's absence a gaping wound in her heart.

"Grandpa won't let Dad take me," Beth went on in a flat monotone. "He won't let them take Mom. We'll be safe there. We'll be happy. They want to take her away." Beth's voice cracked suddenly, became the cry of a frightened child. "They *can't!*"

"Honey, it's all right." Ellen's arms went around her. She knew that terror, had felt it every dark, post-Quake night, as she waited to hear from Rebecca. It had seeped into the marrow of her bones and would never go away. "It's all right," she murmured. Beth was sobbing, her thin body shaking as Ellen held her close.

Nothing was all right. The Quake had shattered the earth. It had shattered buildings and freeways, it had buckled lives, smashed them into ruin. So much *power*, but it was an innocent power; destruction without choice or anger. The sky had absorbed some of that power, had transformed it into the wild, unseasonable storms that were battering the coast. Children were such *sponges*. They absorbed experiences so easily....

Beth's sobs were diminishing. Ellen stroked her hair back from her damp and swollen face. "Why don't you ask your mom if she wants honey or canned milk on her cereal," she said.

"She puts milk on it." Beth hiccoughed. "And brown sugar."

"I think I have a little brown sugar left." How did Julia DeMarco like her

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oatmeal? Ellen fished in the cupboard, found a plastic bag with a few brown lumps left in it. It didn't matter, she thought as she crumbled rock hard lumps onto the steaming cereal. Beth's mother had liked brown sugar on her oatmeal and Beth needed her mother. Desperately. With all the power of the Quake.

She had found her, on the other side of a barbed-wire fence. She had reshaped Julia DeMarco into Laura Sorenson, as innocent and destructive as the Quake that had reshaped California.

"I'll fix yours," Beth said gravely. "Do you want honey and milk on it?"

"Thank you," Ellen said. She picked up the tray, carried it into the bedroom.

"I could eat at the table with you." Laura sat up straighter as Ellen put the tray down on her lap. "I'm feeling much better."

She wore a gold wedding ring on her left hand. "You can get up any time." Was Joseph searching frantically for Julia DeMarco, praying that she was still alive?

"I'll come eat with you." Beth came in with her bowl, her eyes bright with love.

How many days had Beth huddled behind the barbed wire of a refugee camp, filling the black hole of her loss with the Quake's power, waiting for a mother who would never come? Ellen tiptoed into the kitchen. In the bedroom, Beth laughed and Laura joined in tentatively. Maybe Julia had been a volunteer at the refugee center, or had been hired to untangle the miles of legal red tape. Ellen wondered why Beth had chosen her. Perhaps the choice had been as random as the Quake's violence.

She's not dying, Beth had said and those words had been an incantation. This woman couldn't die any more than she could remain Julia DeMarco. Beth needed her mother. Julia DeMarco had had no choice at all.

A bowl of oatmeal cooled on the table, flanked neatly by spoon and napkin. With honey and milk. Sunlight streamed through the window into the cluttered room, and the watercolor Rebecca smiled gently from the wall. "I will always love you," Ellen whispered to her. Standing on her toes, she took the bottle of pills down from the cabinet shelf.

The helicopter from Eureka landed at dusk. The blades flattened the grass in the front yard and whipped a small sandstorm into the air. "In here,"

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Ellen told the tired-looking paramedics who climbed out of the hatch. "She's unconscious." She had put three of the sleeping capsules into Laura's hot chocolate, had been terrified that it might be too much.

The paramedics took Laura's blood pressure, shone a light into her eyes, frowned, and asked Ellen questions. "She seemed to be getting better," Ellen told them. "And then, all of a sudden, she just collapsed. I had Jack call you right away."

"Does she have any ID?" the taller of the two men asked her. He had black hair and dark circles beneath his eyes.

"She had this." Ellen handed them Julia DeMarco's handbag. "Off and on, she'd forget who she was. She was confused. I don't know how she ended up out here."

"Lady, we've seen stranger things." The dark-haired paramedic shrugged. "She's pretty unresponsive. We'll take her in."

They lifted her onto a stretcher with remarkable gentleness and loaded her into the belly of the waiting helicopter; Laura Sorenson, Julia DeMarco. Tomorrow, she would wake up in the Eureka hospital and for a while, she would wonder where she was and who she was. But she would remember. Someone would contact Joseph. He would hurry out to Eureka in an ecstasy of fear and relief, and he would help her to remember. Happy birthday, Joseph.

Outside, the helicopter thundered into the sky. Ellen left the lantern on — a flagrant waste of precious batteries, but she couldn't face the darkness. The room looked strange in the feeble glow of yellow light — streaked with shadows and memories. Each item, each tool in Rebecca's cluttered workspace, carried echoes of laughter and tears and *life*. Memories. Ellen picked up a leather-gouge, envisioning Rebecca bent over her work table. How can you be sure that what you remember really happened? She tucked the gouge into a box and reached for a basket of feathers.

She spent the night sorting through shells, beads, and tools; sorting through the moments of their life together. On the wall, Rebecca's watercolor eyes were full of life and love, full of death. Ellen packed everything into the cartons left over from hauling home the relief supplies. In the gray predawn light, she stacked the last of the filled cartons in a corner of the shed out behind the house.

The first beams of sunlight streaked the sparse grass in the front yard and stretched shadows westward toward the beach. In a few weeks, they would

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have power again, and running water. Slowly, the scars would be covered by new buildings, new grass, new roads, new lives. Scars on the soul were harder to heal. Ellen closed the shed door, snapped the padlock shut.

Beth waited in the neat, uncluttered house, a little unsteady on her feet. "What are you doing? Where's Mom?" She rubbed at her eyes, words slurring a little.

A whole capsule had been just right. "I couldn't sleep." Ellen's heart began to pound, but she kept her tone casual. "I thought I'd clean up Grandpa's house."

Beth's eyes widened.

"I was going to take a walk on the beach," Ellen said quickly. "Do you want to come along?"

Beth nodded slowly, silent and wary.

THE RISING sun burned on the rim of the hills as they walked across the smooth white sand. The Wave had washed out the road in some places, left it hanging like an asphalt cliff in others. Beth remained silent, her twilight eyes full of shadows and unconscious power. I should be afraid, Ellen thought, but she wasn't afraid. She had lost her capacity for fear when she had contemplated the pills, with her hands full of mail.

The watercolor crackled as she pulled it from her pocket and unfolded it. Rebecca smiled at her, eyes sparkling in the morning light. "Rebecca, I love you," Ellen whispered. "I will always love you, but you were the strong one. Not me. I am not strong enough to use the pills and I am not strong enough to live without you. Forgive me." She wrapped the stiff paper around a beach stone and fastened it with one of the thick rubber-bands that had come on the mail. The rising sun stretched her shadow seaward as she drew her arm back and hurled the painting-wrapped stone far out into the offshore swell.

The Quake had released so much power. It charged the air like electricity, it shimmered in Beth's twilight eyes. Innocent power. The power to reshape reality, like the Quake had reshaped the land. Rebecca had needed her, but Rebecca was dead. Beth needed her mother. Ellen could feel that need seeping into the hole Rebecca had left in her life, filling her up like the tide. Behind her, waves curled and broke, dissolving the painting. She didn't want to look at Rebecca's face one day, and see a stranger.

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What will I remember tomorrow? Ellen reached for Beth's hand, shivering a little at the cool touch of the girl's fingers. She could feel the change shuddering through her, an invisible Quake across the landscape of the soul. "There's chocolate in the cupboard. We've got margarine from the last relief boat and canned milk," Ellen smiled. "We could try to make fudge. It's Wednesday, after all."

Beth's slow smile was like the sun rising, bringing color to the gray world. "It *is* Wednesday." She put her arm around Ellen's waist, face turned up to hers, eyes full of twilight and love. "I'm so *glad* we're here," she said.

"Me, too," Ellen whispered. She could almost remember it — the apartment and the doctor's office where she had worked. Tomorrow, or the next day, she *would* remember it. Beth needed her. She would take care of her daughter and they would be happy together.

Beth had said so.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION 1. Title of Publication, THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. 2. Date of filing, Oct. 1, 1993. 3. Frequency of issue, monthly. 3A. Annual subscription price, $26.00. 4. Location of known office of publication (not printers), 143 Cream Hill Rd., W. Cornwall, CT 06796. 5. Location of the headquarters or general business offices of the publishers, 143 Cream Hill Rd., W. Cornwall, CT 06796. 6. Publisher, Edward L. Ferman, 143 Cream Hill Rd., W. Cornwall, CT 06796. Editor, Kristine K. Rusch, 143 Cream Hill Rd., W. Cornwall, CT 06796. 7. Owner, Mercury Press, Inc., 143 Cream Hill Rd., W. Cornwall, CT 06796. Edward L. Ferman. 8. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: none. 10. Extent and nature of circulation: A. Total No. Copies printed (net press run): average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 73,061; actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 66,077. B. Paid circulation. 1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales: average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months 9,857. Single issue nearest to filing date 10,192. 2. Mail subscriptions: average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months 47,598. Single issue nearest to filing date 41,500. C. Total paid circulation: average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months 57,455. Single issue nearest to filing date 51,692. D. Free distribution by mail carrier or other means, samples, complimentary, and other free copies: average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months 300. Single issue nearest to filing date 300. E. Total distribution (sum of C and D): average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months 57,755. Single issue nearest to filing date 51,992. F. Copies not distributed. 1. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing: average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months 4,183. Single issue nearest to filing date 4,573. 2. Returns from news agents: average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months 11,123. Single issue nearest to filing date 9,512. G. Total (sum of E and F — should equal net press run shown in A): average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months 73,061. Single issue nearest to filing date 66,077. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. Edward L. Ferman, Publisher.

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worth a high recommendation. In times of high stress I read extremely light material (some of it so brainless that when I went to record it on the list, I couldn't remember the title). In times of lower stress I read heavy non-fiction books or novels that required a lot of concentration. When I discovered an author I liked I went to the bookstore and bought all of her books, and then read them in chronological order. My reading tastes in fiction ran from science fiction and fantasy to mystery to suspense to mainstream bestseller to classics to romance to glitz novels. In non-fiction I read four biographies, several books of essays, a lot of history, and one book on economics.

I discovered a lot of fantasy mixed into the other genres. Sharon McCrumb's *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, Elizabeth Harris's *The Herb Gatherers*, and James Lee Burke's *In the Electric Mist with the Confederate Dead* were the best of these. Most of the outside-of-the-genre horror I discovered in non-fiction. Peter Mathiessen's *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* was the most frightening book I read all year. As for the best non-genre science fiction, I also found that in non-fiction: Joel Kurtzman's *The Death of Money*. (Even though it is not a book I recommend. I mentioned my recommended science fiction books in the March editorial.)

As for the worst book I finished last year, I honestly don't know what it was. I read it in July and it is marked on my list as "?" under the author column and "?" under the title column. Obviously it made a great impression.

And what have I learned? That while I read a lot I don't finish a lot. I dip and skim or start books and abandon them as soon as they bore me. I also realized that I read a lot of genres I claim to hate — especially when life makes some major demands on me — and that just because I have finished a book doesn't mean that it is good. On the other hand I remember a lot of the books with fondness and it feels as if I have just finished them yesterday. They have become part of my internal landscape and I would remember them even if I hadn't put them on my reading list.

I have already started my list for 1994, and it will contain a few changes. This time I will make a note of what compelled me to finish the book. I will also record whether or not I liked the book even if it was flawed.

Keeping the reading list was one of the most enjoyable things I have ever done. It is a bit like a short-hand journal. I look forward to finding the peaks and valleys in 1994.

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Leslie What made her first appearance in F&SF last month with her short story, "Clinging to a Thread." Her second story is quite different.

Leslie wrote "Designated Hater" after a man driving a pickup followed her home one night. "I didn't want him to know where I lived," she writes, "so I pulled into a stranger's driveway and told my kids to crouch down and hide, hoping he'd pass without seeing us. At the time, I wished there was something I could do to him. Maybe that's the beauty of fiction."

Designated Hater

By Leslie What

GO AHEAD, ADMIT IT. NOW and then you think about getting even.

Like a month ago, walking back to work after a picnic in the park, your shoes shined, your fingertips smelling of sliced oranges. You planned to ask the new production manager to dinner. Only one block to go when you stepped in warm dog droppings. You spent the rest of the day with your nose wrinkled up, trying to avoid an odor so rank it made you want to puke, unable to stop tracking the scent.

Stupid dog owners, who let their dogs shit on the sidewalk — where it melts under the sun like bubble gum — instead of on their own constipated lawns. There it could have sat like wet toadstools for *them* to step on, making it *their* problem instead of yours. You don't have a dog, and it pisses you off that dog owners never seem to step in crap.

Remember:

The weekend when you were late to pick up the kids from your ex's. You stopped at the grocery for a carton of milk, a loaf of bread, and a couple of cans

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of tuna. The express lane was closed, so you waited, telling yourself it only felt like the line was moving slower than committing suicide by slit wrists. Then a checker tapped you on the shoulder and said, "I'm open over here." You left your place in line to follow him to another register.

That checker couldn't figure out how to open his machine; when he did, someone sidled up to the other end of the counter, the freedom side, demanding that he count their bottles before they did their shopping. The checker pegged you as reasonable and said, "This will just take a second."

It took five minutes because of a slight discrepancy in the bottle count. Meanwhile the checker's ballpoint pen stopped working; he asked to borrow yours to scribble some numbers on his pad. An agreement was finally reached and the checker opened his register. He took his sweet time rooting around the drawer for change. Another checker leaned over to ask for a price check on baby lima beans. By the time your checker got back to you, you were steamed. Your ex was going to give you grief for being late again and you said, "I don't need this shit!" You tipped over the milk carton, grabbed the ballpoint you knew wasn't yours, and stormed from the store, swearing you'd never shop there again. You were pissed and getting more pissed by the minute because you were hopelessly late, but still out of milk, bread, and tuna.

Remember: The night that guy in the olive-colored pickup pulled behind you and blasted his horn. To teach him a lesson, you lifted your foot from the accelerator, slowed the car, just a little, but enough to make him mad. Your cheeks blushed warm and you felt a little ache that you at first assumed was only your gut acting up; before long you started worrying that the pain came from your heart.

The pickup's brights were halogen enhanced. You switched your rear-view mirror to its night setting, avoiding blindness, and gave him the bird when he roared past. He cut in front of you, as if mooning you with his truck. You leaned on your horn and switched on your brights, a little shaky but feeling brave for having fought back. Then you saw the empty gun rack through his back window.

Now, hold that thought.

And take a deep breath, then let it leak out with a growl that leaves your voice scratched like the finish on your first new car an hour after you drove it off the lot.

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You're sitting down for breakfast at your formica-top table. You chew on a triangle of dry toast, irritated beyond belief that you're out of jam and coffee, and the only store within twenty miles is the one where you vowed you'd never shop. You're with a guy — not just any guy, but someone you've heard of, maybe even respect, or at least fear — who has come to offer you the opportunity of a lifetime. The guy must read minds; he snaps his fingers and two cups of coffee appear. He slides yours across the smooth table. You're afraid to ask for jam.

"I've had my scouts out watching you for a long time and they tell me that you're finally ready to join up with the big leagues. I want you to sign on the dotted line," he says, and thrusts a piece of paper with his "X" already scrawled in black blood. "It's easy," he says. "I'm giving you the chance to manage the Designated Hater and get back at every SOB who's ever stood in your way. It works like this...."

You'll live your life, just as you've always done, except from now on you'll control the power of divine retribution. You'll pick some poor schmo to do the dirty work for you, but you'll choose the targets.

"Keeps your hands clean. Plausible Deniability," he says. "Tons more satisfying than doing the work yourself. Remember that guy in Toledo who went postal after losing his job? He shot up the place, killed people he'd been working with for years. Remember how nobody understood why he did it? The guy himself couldn't tell you, but here's the secret," he says.

"He did it under orders from my last manager. That's the beauty of the system. A vicarious thrill. The Designated Hater does the work, takes the risks, eats the stress; the manager watches it go down, relaxes, thinks up more ideas. For someone like you it's a win-win situation."

You suddenly understand that random violence is not random, but is contracted out. It all makes perfect sense, now that you know how things work. You lean forward. "So why are you talking to me? What happened to the last guy?"

"Retired," he says. "Was with me forty years. Says you can call to chit-chat about the job, if you want."

You can't help but be interested, but you've read your share of deal-with-the-devil stories, so you're understandably cautious. "What's the catch?" you ask.

"It's a volunteer position," he says, "and unless something happens to

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me, there's not much opportunity for advancement. I can't think of anything else, other than that."

You tell him, "No. It sounds rather extreme." He shrugs, and burns some numbers into the tabletop with his breath. "If you change your mind, just give me a fax," he says. He disappears in a puff of smoke, leaving the contract fluttering above the table.

You clear the dishes and shove the paper into the garbage sack. You hurry to the office, but find it impossible to keep your mind on your work. The boss notices you sitting around and gives you a little something extra to work on at home.

It takes you four hours to finish that little something. You're hungry, but all you can find for dinner is a banana that's gone black. The flesh is soft, so sweet it tastes metallic. You toss the peel into the garbage and — almost as an afterthought — pick your way through the trash to retrieve the contract. The paper is smooth, strangely cold. You read carefully, searching for loopholes, then fold the paper into fourths and slip it into the back of your bureau drawer.

You tell yourself, "I'm not interested," but you know it's pretty low when you have to lie to yourself because no one else is there to listen. You struggle to keep from opening that drawer to read the contract over one more time.

You picture yourself signing on the dotted line. Your hand goes to your pocket, where your purloined ball-point pen has just leaked and left your new shirt bruised for life.

You know that managing the Designated Hater would make life a little easier. Because sometime soon — maybe later tonight, maybe not till tomorrow morning — someone is going to do something else so stupid it pisses you off, pushes you a little further over the edge. Consider your options. Really, when you think about it, you're the most qualified applicant around.

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Dale Bailey lives in Tennessee with his wife, Jean, and a portly cat named Gatsby. He is pursuing his Ph.D. in English and teaching at the University of Tennessee.

His short story, "Touched" (Oct/Nov 1993), will be reprinted in The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction, *which St. Martin's Press will publish to commemorate our 45th anniversary. He made his first appearance in print in these pages last year, and we have several more of his stories in inventory.*

Conquistador

By Dale Bailey

WHEN THE PHONE RANG that Friday morning, Howard was staring blankly at the picture of his wife, Bethesda, that stood on his desk. Occasionally, during the long empty days, he stared at that picture and daydreamed of Bethesda as she used to be. In those dreams, he found himself stripping away the pads of fatty tissue which had accumulated about her features. He would pry them up and peel them away, one by one, hoping at last to discover the woman he had married imprisoned beneath the countless layers of flesh, like the tiny jeweled figure at the core of a set of nesting dolls. It was an endless task, even in the dreams.

And so it was that on this day, as on most days, he dreamed instead of fish. Fish of all colors and types — infinitely varied and beautiful schools of butterfly fish and leopard fish and common gold fish — drifted through his mind. Long ago, Howard had hoped to be an ichthyologist, but that dream had slowly died, crushed beneath the weight of time and circumstance. These days, he worked in data entry at a water treatment plant, a job he had taken

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years ago to make ends meet. Now, the report he should have been typing lay forgotten on his blotter while he dreamed of the tropical fish in his basement hideaway. If he couldn't actually go look at them when he was at work, he often consoled himself, he could at least think about them.

When the phone rang, however, even that tiny consolation was lost. Fragile as spun glass, his fantasy shattered and his mind returned abruptly to the busy office where he worked. Outside his cubicle, Howard could hear a cacophony of ringing phones, typing, and conversation. His own phone rang again. Without interest, Howard picked up the receiver. "This is Howard. How can I help you?"

"Howard?" said the voice at the other end of the phone. A male voice, breathless with excitement.

"Yes, this is Howard," Howard said. "Can I help you?"

"You've got to come down here at once. At once."

"Frank?" Howard asked. Frank, Howard's only friend, was the proprietor of the Finny Tribe Fish Store. But Frank had never called him at work. "Is that you, Frank?"

"Yes, it's me. Now get down here!"

"But why?"

"I have something to show you!"

"But. Frank, I'm at work. I can't just walk out."

"Well, come at lunch. But come soon!"

"What is it? What have you got?" Frank's excitement was catching. Howard could hear it in his own voice — a shrill undercurrent of hysteria.

"You'll see," said Frank. "You'll see when you get here." He hung up.

Howard placed the receiver in its cradle and glared at the report on his desk, his pleasant reverie of fish irretrievably lost. He looked at the clock. It was ten thirty-eight. Reluctantly, he began to type. Lunch seemed a very long time away.

When Howard reached the Finny Tribe, Frank pumped his arm enthusiastically. "Howard," he said. "Have I got a treat for you."

"What? What is it?"

"You'll see," Frank said.

He led Howard back into the interior of the store, past displays of nets and oxygenators, past a window where dust motes turned in a shaft of sunshine,

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past stacks of empty aquariums that gleamed with polished vacuity in the fluorescent light. As they entered the back room, Howard inhaled deeply, savoring the ripe, moist, aquarium smell. In that place, with the hundreds of fish secure in their aquariums, Howard felt young and vigorous and alive, as if the endless weight of unchanging days had fallen suddenly away.

"Look at it!" Frank said, staring in awe at the large aquarium before them.

Howard stared into the aquarium in amazement.

Within swam a conquistador, a fish Howard had always dreamed of seeing, of owning. Muscles rippled smoothly as it powered itself through the water and its scaly hide shimmered in the muted radiance of the aquarium. It arrowed away, looped under a gnarled coral archway, and came to rest in the water before him, hovering. Elaborate fins, tapering away into filmy nothingness, billowed along its four-inch length. Even as Howard looked on in dumb wonder it shrugged the rainbow-hued crest that swept back from its slim face like the wings of an angel.

As the conquistador darted away to cruise the perimeter of the tank, Howard was swept up in its smooth trajectory. Nothing of the sort had ever happened to him before. It seemed, momentarily, as if he had become the fish. Brine pulsed through his gills and water caressed his sleek armored length as he ascended toward the distant surface, climbing, climbing, and diving again to cruise the graveled bottom. When the fish drifted into concealment behind the coral ridge, Howard returned to himself with a shock. Bubbles danced surfaceward through the still water.

The icy touch of departing magic rippled through Howard, along his cheeks, his arms, down unsteady legs. Bemused, he stared at the tiny models perched atop the ridge: a diver in an old-fashioned diving suit, an overturned pirate's chest spilling gaudy wealth into the water.

"A conquistador," Howard whispered into the stillness. "Frank, I've got to have it. Can you hold it for me?"

"I don't know. It's pretty rare, and — "

"Just for a day or two. Till Monday evening. That's all."

"Howard, I — "

"Frank, I've never asked you to do anything like this before. Never. One weekend, that's all I ask."

"Till Monday, then," Frank said. "Hell, Howard, can you even afford it?"

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Howard looked down at the tiny label affixed to the lower right hand corner of the conquistador's tank:

Conquistador
(Icthyus–Conquistadorus)
$1200

"I don't know," he said. And he thought of Bethesda, sitting at home as she always did. He supposed he *did* know, but he could never say as much. "I'm going to try."

ALL THAT long weekend the conquistador haunted Howard's dreams. Saturday afternoon he whiled away in the undersea glow of his basement hideaway. He cleaned his largest aquarium, installed a fresh filter and air pump, and mixed new water, carefully adjusting the heater to 75° F. Eyes blind to the elaborate waltzes of the tropical fish in their glass prisons, deaf even to the maudlin television sentiment that filtered through the ceiling, he spent the day transported by a recurring vision of the conquistador.

Sunday he passed in a daze, ticking off Bethesda's list of chores with the plodding inattention of a somnambulist. Finally, on Sunday evening, his mind awash in a flood of tropical brine, a whole school of conquistadors performing synchronized swimming routines before his unbelieving eyes, he made his way upstairs to face Bethesda. She sat in the BarcaLounger, her feet propped up, watching a rerun of *Gone with the Wind* on the wide-screen television. In one fist she clasped a can of Diet Coke. With the unrelenting rhythm of an automaton, her other hand made regular trips between her mouth and a bag of Orville Redenbacher microwave popcorn.

She cocked an eye at Howard, staring mutely at the television from the far corner of the couch. "Hello there, stranger," she said. "What's up?"

Howard cleared his throat and launched unthinking into it. He hadn't mentioned the fish to Bethesda before, but all weekend he had attempted to be more attentive to her needs than he had in recent years. If he'd failed it had been only because of the icthyic visions which had washed over him with almost tidal regularity since Friday afternoon. Now, when he'd finished, the last words tumbling from him in a plaintive rush, Bethesda said, "Howard,

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how much is it?"

"Twelve hundred dollars," Howard said.

"Twelve hundred dollars! Howard, are you out of your mind?" She stabbed the remote with her blunt finger and the television turned off abruptly. She turned to look at him.

Howard stared back at her, searching her wide heavy face for some vestige of the woman he had married. In those days, when Bethesda had been just Beth, it had not mattered that they shared few interests. It had not even mattered that Bethesda possessed few skills to contribute to their union, that Howard alone would have to be responsible for their living. For Howard, it had been enough that this cheerful, statuesque, even voluptuous woman had taken an interest in him. These days, however, Howard rarely thought of Bethesda in such flattering terms. These days, he usually just thought of her as fat.

"Howard!" Bethesda said. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes," Howard said. "I heard you. And no, I am not out of my mind."

"Then what makes you think we can afford a twelve hundred dollar fish?"

"We *can* afford it, barely. We afforded that!" He jabbed his finger at the gigantic television.

"We're still *paying* for that! Don't you think this fish thing has gone far enough? You never come upstairs with me anymore."

"Well, you never do anything. You just sit in this house and watch television."

"Well, you just sit down there and stare at your aquariums, Howard. Anyway, you must have at least twelve hundred invested in the fish you already own. Not to mention the equipment."

Howard stood up and paced to the window. Pulling aside the curtain, he stared out into the night, but all he could see was the reflection of the den — as if the house went on forever, an endless prison of joyless rooms. As if there was no other place on earth. "It's extremely rare," he said. "I'll probably never get a chance for another one. If they repossess the television, we can always get another one, Bethesda. Always."

Howard turned and looked into her small eyes, recessed in the countless folds of flesh that had accreted about them over the years. He was surprised to see that they were slick with tears.

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"Oh, Howard," Bethesda said, "it's not that. I just don't understand why you can't ever pay any attention to me."

The next morning at work, Howard hunched over his desk with focused intensity. Documents washed across his working space with the metronomic regularity of waves, but he typed them without his usual frustration, taking refuge in the numbingly mindless activity of his fingers. He was a rock. All thoughts of the conquistador had been banished from his mind and if occasionally, during that long morning, he *did* think of the fish, he glanced at the photograph on his desk and recalled Bethesda's eyes as they filled with tears. At first that was enough to do it. It was okay, he would tell himself. He was resolved. He was a rock.

By noon, however, the endless flow of his imagination had begun to erode that rock. When he returned from lunch he found himself occasionally immersed in oceanic fantasies through which the rainbow-hued conquistador darted with ease. At three o'clock, he discovered to his horror that he had sketched its frilly-necked silhouette across the final draft of a report for a corporate client. By four, the rock of his resolve had been reduced to a smooth wave-tossed pebble.

The Finny Tribe was closed when Howard arrived that evening. The security lights were already dimly aglow in the quiet interior and the *Closed* sign was suspended in the window. It mocked him cheerily — *Please call again!* — as he plodded across the lot to rap halfheartedly at the door. He was just turning away when the interior was flooded with light and the neon sign in the window sputtered to life.

"Howard," Frank said as he opened the door. "So you've come back. I thought you would."

Without another word, Frank turned and led him into the watery half-light of the back room. For a long moment they stood in reverent silence before the conquistador. The fish passed through the water with thoughtless grace, its rainbow-hued frill pulsing with vitality. It hovered momentarily above the plastic diver poised atop the coral mountain. Then its caudal fin flexed and it darted into concealment, its wake upsetting the placid diver. The diver drifted slowly through the water and came to rest on the graveled bottom of the tank. Atop the ridge, the pirate's chest disgorged its Midas banquet.

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That delicate magic traced icy patterns across Howard's cheeks, fleeing.

"Good God, it's beautiful."

"So it is," Frank said. "And rare. I know at least two other collectors who would die for it."

In the tank, the conquistador slipped from its hiding place. Cruising scant centimeters above the brightly graveled surface, it approached the body of the fallen diver, hovered for a moment, and shot away. It threaded its way through the drifting fronds of an underwater forest, its scales coruscating in the watery light.

"I've got to have it," Howard said.

"Howard, I can't hold it any longer. I'd love to, but I just can't."

"You don't have to hold it." The words filled the quiet room. A long moment stretched out and in that silence it seemed to Howard that he could hear the muted surge and fall of blood booming through his body. He thought of Bethesda, her narrow eyes filling with tears, and he tried to pull those words back, felt his tongue and lips shape themselves about the syllables of a retraction —

But then the conquistador exploded out of the shadow-decked forest and ascended through the water in a long arc, its crest flattened by speed, light scintillant along its polished scales. It drove itself to the surface of the tank and dived again, vertically, pulling up at the last breathtaking minute to come to rest, suspended like a living jewel in the water before him.

Howard gasped. It was beautiful. She was beautiful. *She.* And in the pronoun he detected the quiet ring of possession.

"Miranda," he said. "I'll call you Miranda."

A few minutes later, Howard slid his Visa — charged to the limit — back into his wallet. Carefully, he lifted the plastic bag where Miranda was suspended like an angel in a tear drop and lowered it into a paper sack. The last thing he noticed as he left the Finny Tribe that Monday evening was a small sign taped discreetly to the cash register. It said:

Sorry. No Returns on Fish.

When he got home, headlights ripping cone-shaped swaths through the web of shadows draped across the front yard, Bethesda was waiting at the door. Cold light leaked about her bulky figure and into the gathering night as Howard walked to the house, the paper bag containing the conquistador

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clasped carefully in his hand.

As he mounted the concrete steps, Bethesda stepped back into the harsh radiance of the den. The door swung shut behind him with a sound like the clap of a prison gate. Inside, *A Current Affair* was playing on the television.

"Howard," Bethesda said. "I was worried."

Howard was still for a long moment. That vein at his temple began to pulse once more. "I'm sorry," he said, stepping past her toward the hall and the door to the basement.

Bethesda looked at the bag Howard carried. "You bought the fish, didn't you?" she said.

Howard looked at his feet, his face flushing with heat. He pulled the door open with his free hand. "No," he said. "I bought another fish. It was only fifty dollars."

"Howard. You better not have bought that fish."

"Don't worry," he said as he stepped down to the top stair. He pulled the door closed behind him and stood there for a long moment, alone.

His heart hammered. During the long years, they had slowly drifted away from each other, but they had rarely fought. Until now, they had politely, if without real interest, shared their home. Until now, Howard had never felt compelled to lie to Bethesda. He had the sense of some irrevocable marker reached and passed. Some turning point.

And then the bag vibrated in his hand, reminding him of the fish. Of Miranda. Howard took a deep breath and descended into the darkness.

Down there, he gripped the plastic bag tightly and let the paper sack drop to the concrete floor. Miranda nosed at the bulging perimeter of her prison. Aqueous light sparkled along her rainbow-stained flanks. His eyes shining, Howard lowered Miranda, bag and all, into the newly prepared aquarium to begin the process of acclimating her to her new home.

Then Howard eased off his shoes and lowered himself onto the sagging couch in the precise center of the room, consciously ignoring the television which blared from above. A warm glow of contentment suffused him. His eyes roamed about the aquariums, drinking in the quiet vision of the myriad fish, secure in their glass prisons.

Later, after slowly intermixing the water in the bag and that in the surrounding aquarium, he released Miranda into her new home. As soon as she was free, Miranda flexed her tail and darted away to probe tentatively

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about the perimeter of the aquarium. Smiling, Howard settled back onto the couch to watch. She was frightened now, but she would soon grow used to her new home. It was just a matter of time.

Meanwhile, he sat there and watched her, asea in the flickering luminescence of the aquariums. Icy fingers caressed him, numbing, and slowly, almost imperceptibly, his arms were transformed into great translucent fins, fanning out into the water around him. His legs knotted together, twining into a powerful tail. Scales sprang up from beneath his skin, and gills billowed open along his cheeks. Through the azure water he dove, deeper and deeper, as cleansing brine pulsed through his gills. Deeper he dove, and still deeper, and finally there were no other fish. There was no one. Through the deep water, sunlight fell, splintered into a thousand sparkling diamonds by the current, and he coasted silently through sun and drifting shadow, unthinking.

There was only the steady blare of the television filtering through the ceiling to remind him.

HE WOKE to silence, pinned in a shaft of light that fell into the dim basement from the open door. All around him, tropical fish turned and turned.

Miranda was suspended in the large aquarium directly before him, gills swelling.

Bethesda said, "You bought it, didn't you?"

Howard gasped. Fragment by slow fragment, his sleepy eyes pieced his wife's form out of the darkness.

"That's it, isn't it?" She moved through the darkness to stop by Miranda's aquarium. Her hand floated into the shaft of light from upstairs, gesturing.

Startled, Miranda darted away to conceal herself behind the knot of coral. At the same instant, Howard came to his feet. His heart pounded; his fingers curled into talons.

Bethesda retreated uncertainly. "Howard?"

He pulled to a stop, gasping. "I — I'm sorry. I thought you were going to hurt Miranda."

Bethesda stepped toward him again, and the light fell half-across her face, bisecting it. "Miranda?"

Howard lowered himself back to the couch. "Miranda. The fish."

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"Oh." Her voice was ominously quiet, quieter than he had ever heard it in all the years they had been married. "You bought the fish today, didn't you, Howard? The one you wanted."

Howard said nothing.

"You knew we couldn't afford it."

"Bethesda," he said. "Bethesda, I didn't have a choice. I'll never get another chance."

"I see. Well, you can take it back."

"I won't take it back. I can't."

Bethesda was silent for a long time. "You know what's worse than just buying the damn fish, Howard," she said at last, her voice heavy with the promise of tears. Tears, and something else — some resolve Howard had never before heard. "You know what's worst of all? You lied to me." She sobbed once, briefly, and fell silent again.

For a long time there was no sound in the room but the quiet gurgle of air filters, of bubbles rising slowly surfaceward in the aquariums. Finally, thinking she had gone, Howard opened his eyes. But she was still there, by Miranda's tank, one side of her face submerged in shadow, staring at him, the one eye he could see cold with anger. That sense of having reached a turning point, an irrevocable crux, came back to him.

Bethesda's face grew colder still, as if she too had found something within her she had not been aware of before. She said, "It's late, Howard. Come to bed."

And Howard followed her upstairs. That night, he was swept away by a tide of dreams. Transformed beside his sleeping wife, he cruised the dark waters of sleep. Perhaps he heard Bethesda get up in the night, but later, remembering, he was never certain. If he did, he must have thought she was going to the toilet, must have rolled over, pulled his pillow close, and drowned himself in dreams again.

The next morning, he woke at six. As always, he made his way into the adjoining bathroom and relieved himself, his eyes closed, half-asleep.

When he opened his eyes to shake himself clean, he found Miranda floating in the garish yellow water of the toilet, belly up. The brilliant colors had fled from her underscales. The light from the fluorescent bar above the sink glinted dully in one black eye.

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Later that day, looking back, he was proudest of the fact that he had remained calm. He did not even speak. Kneeling, he fished Miranda from the polluted water and rinsed away the golden droplets which clung to her frilly collar. Then he went on about his morning — showered, shaved, scrubbed his teeth, even set the alarm clock for nine-fifty, as he did every morning, so Bethesda wouldn't miss *Wheel of Fortune.*

As a sole concession to the anger that boiled within him, he removed from its place above the living room mantel Bethesda's prized photograph of Elvis Presley — signed by the King himself following a concert in Vegas. Not that Bethesda would notice, not immediately anyway. She passed her days in the den watching television, pausing only for trips into the kitchen for popcorn, Ding-Dongs, and Eskimo Pies. The living room was reserved for entertaining, closed off, inviolate, furniture still enveloped in plastic. Nonetheless, watching the thin line of blue flame curl up from one corner and devour Elvis Presley's bloated face gave Howard at least a temporary measure of satisfaction.

He buried Miranda in the back yard, struggling to suppress tears as the spade bit into the chill morning earth. Then he went on to work.

At lunch, he drove down to Macon's Sports Emporium and bought a Louisville Slugger, paying cash. He tried not to question what he was planning to do. He tried to be as cold and emotionless as a robot, tried to pretend that someone had removed all those warm, fallible, human viscera and replaced them with shining cogs and gears and coils of copper tubing. Tried to pretend that his heart was an iron pump, unfeeling, that machine oil coursed through his veins.

Later, at home, while Bethesda took her evening bath, he walked to the car and removed the bat from the trunk.

Bethesda glared at him in shock when he kicked the door open. Her mouth gaped. Her eyes widened.

"Howard! What are you doing?" She raised her hand to cover her breasts, and water lapped over the edge of the tub. "Why do you have that bat?"

Howard glanced at the bat, clenched tight and half-upraised, and returned his gaze to his wife. Bethesda shifted her weight in the tub. Water sloshed over the tiles. Her heavy features twisted into a helpless, frightened mask.

"Howard?" she said, almost whimpering. And her eyes filled up with

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tears.

When Howard saw those eyes, saw tears spill across her wide cheeks, he knew he could not do it. It did not matter that things were irrevocably changed, that they had passed some turning point. He let the bat clatter to the floor.

"Get out of the water," he said.

"What?"

An image of Miranda came to him, her flanks shimmering with aqueous light as she darted gracefully through the water. Bethesda — bloated monstrosity of a woman — had no business in the water. When she wallowed about, it sloshed and splashed, spilled over the edge of the tub and gathered in the recessed borders between the tiles. She looked like a great pasty-white slug, her flesh quivering and jiggling gracelessly as she shifted in the tub. She was an affront.

"I said, get out," he repeated, and when she didn't move he strode deliberately across the small room, kicking the abandoned bat aside. Clutching her water-slick arms, he heaved her out of the tub. Water sloshed across the tiles, soaking his pants as he propelled her out of the bathroom, down the hall, and through the den to the front door. Fat pinched and folded across the back of her thighs. Her feet left wet tracks in the carpet.

"Get out," he said. Holding her with one hand, he jerked the front door open.

"Howard!" she screamed. "I don't have any clothes on!"

Howard didn't reply. He thrust her out into the night, across the concrete stoop and down into the tiny yard below. As she struggled to maintain her balance, she turned to look up at him, her expression shocked and subdued. He slammed the door in her face.

Silence filled the house. Howard locked the door.

Even as he reached the basement stairs, the silence burst like a pustule and noise erupted into the night.

"Howard! Let me in! Let me in this minute!"

Howard shut the basement door and descended the stairs. He sat on the couch and Bethesda's voice came to him, as incoherent and meaningless as the noise of a distant radio.

About him, the tropical fish soared and plunged, visions of beauty behind glass walls. He concentrated on the transformation, trying to conjure up that

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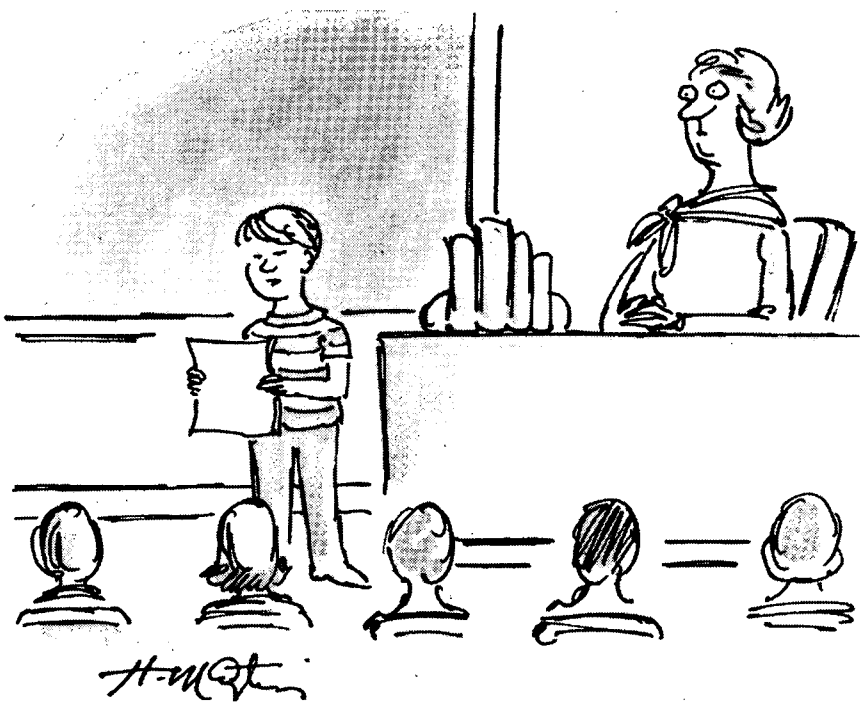
exquisite pain as gills tore open across his cheeks, as scales pushed up from beneath his flesh, as his legs knotted themselves into a muscled tail.

Once, for an instant, he thought he felt that icy numbness, and his heart rose within him. In the flickering half-light he peered anxiously at his arms, waiting for them to billow out around him like sails, at his feet, waiting for them to fuse into a scaly tail. But nothing happened and when he shifted his weight, the numbness departed.

"Howard!" he heard Bethesda scream. "Howard!"

Howard glared wildly about his basement hideaway, saw all the tropical fish turning and turning in their glass prisons, and closed his eyes. Safe, he thought. Secure as a fish in a tank.

From upstairs he heard the sound of breaking glass.



"WHAT I DID THIS SUMMER. This summer I saw Jurassic Park *and bought a Jurassic Park T-shirt and a Jurassic Park coloring book and a Jurassic Park sound track cassette and a Jurassic Park cap and a Jurassic Park pencil case and a Jurassic Park lunch box and a Jurassic Park rubber tyrannosaur and a Jurassic Park ..."*

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

SICK PUPPY AUTEUR?

I'VE NEVER given much credence to the auteur theory. (You know, that the director is the *author* of filmic art.) First off, it's the most blatant insult to the writer of the screenplay. People who actually write movies get way too little respect to start with. To ascribe authorship to anyone other than the *author* strikes me as just plain nasty.

And it's stupid, too. At least when it comes to Hollywood movies, where most movies are made by committee. And where that committee is (too often) controlled by business people, not creative types.

Still, occasionally, a body of work is produced with a particular person's name attached, and you pick up enough of a pattern (when it comes to theme and/or visual style) that you understand what all those eggheads crying "Auteur! Auteur!" had in mind.

And the particular person who seems to leave a personality imprint on a film is *usually* the director. But it doesn't have to be. Sometimes it's the producer. (A lot of people look at the low-budget horror classics produced by Val Lewton, and see the work of a single master-stylist, even though Lewton worked with several directors.) Sometimes, it's even the author who leaves his indelible mark on movies. (Bruce Joel Rubin didn't become a director until his latest, *My Life*, but it's not hard to see the links between this latest death melodrama and earlier Rubin screenplays, *Ghost* and *Jacob's Ladder*. Some might even be able to tie in Rubin's early ill-fated story for *Brainstorm*.)

But even where the directors do indeed *seem* to bring a distinct imagination to their projects, I've always rigorously resisted the temptation to assign god-the-creator status to them.

Take Tim Burton, for example.

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If I were going to call any American filmmaker emerging in the last ten years an auteur, it would probably be Timmy. He is, I think, just the kind of brilliant lunatic Hollywood needs more of these days. He has vision and what amounts (in Tinseltown terms) to integrity. And he is one marvelously sick puppy!

This, at a time when Hollywood seems almost obsessed with the ordinary and dull. Look at today's movies and the characters who inhabit them. Stereotypes vary little within any particular formula. A movie may involve a grimy, sweaty fellow blowing up anything moving (and/or anything stationary), or dapper guys (who stepped out of GQ) and gals (who stepped out of *Vogue*) whining for a couple of hours. Or it might consist of kids (substitute: old codgers, whales, dogs) acting adorably zany or heart-tuggingly tragic.

The predictable same-old same-old rules the industry.

But not in a Tim Burton film. Things may explode, and characters may whine or act cute in his movies. But seldom in expected ways. And never in a way that could be described as normal. A Burton hero is a soul driven to discovery. He (and in almost all cases, all the important characters *are* male) is intelligent, creative — and more than a little demented.

And the motif is there from Burton's earliest work. In his short, *Frankenweenie* (1984), a little boy refuses to accept the death of his beloved dog. When a teacher (played by sicko filmmaker Paul Bartel) demonstrates how electrical shock can stimulate even a dead frog, little Victor (Barret Oliver) becomes the mad scientist of suburbia.

Burton's first full-length film as a director was the loopy and endearing *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* (1985) starring Paul Reubens as a man-child consumed by his longing for his stolen bicycle. An exciting but dangerous odyssey to the Alamo and back is nothing to Pee-Wee, if there's even a chance of seeing his precious wheels once more.

In 1988 came Burton's brilliant, breakthrough movie, *Beetlejuice*. Michael Keaton (whom many critics and movie-goers had written off after a string of pathetic comedies — like *Touch and Go* and *The Squeeze*) turned in a bravura performance in the title role as a bureaucrat of the afterlife gone bad. The psychopathic Mr. B calls himself a bio-exorcist. But *he* is the demonic presence that must be driven out when a charming ghost couple (Geena Davis, Alec Baldwin) and the clinically depressed, living teen (Winona Ryder) who befriends

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them make the mistake of asking for his help.

Beetlejuice was macabre and hilarious, and oddly heart-warming. (And it even had the divine Sylvia Sidney in it!) It was a success, but not like next year's *Batman*.

Now, I consider both *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992) to be very interesting movies, as blockbusters go. But they're not even close to being my favorite Burton films. They are too dark. (Not in tone, but in their look.) And the constraints of the DC Comics superhero put a crimp in Burton's personal style.

And yet, the spin Burton (and his writers and tech. artists) put on the Bob Kane original and its broadcast descendants is so Burtonesque that both films constantly surprise and delight us. The director leads us to an unsettling recognition that Batman (Keaton, again) may be just as psychotic as the super-villains he's trying to stop.

Batman Returns, which is much more the director's film, paints the superhero as a schizophrenic, as well. It is fascinating to watch Batman and Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) struggle with their love-hate feelings for one another, even as the "duality" in each of their personalities threatens to tear them apart.

Although it was nowhere near as successful as the batmovies before and after it, *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) is, to my mind, Burton's finest work to date. It is a moving fable of a Frankensteinish lad (Johnny Depp), left unfinished by the death of his inventor/father (the lovely, lamented Vincent Price). Instead of fingers, Edward has long scissor-blades. Even so, his shy loneliness fills the heart of a visiting Avon Lady (Dianne Wiest) with pity. And she brings Edward back with her to her pastel, ticky-tacky suburban home.

Edward's scissorhands make him freakish and frightening to his new (equally strange, utterly unimaginative) neighbors. Yet it is through his difference that Edward finds creative expression. He discovers his talents cutting hair, grooming dogs, and making beautiful garden topiaries and ice sculptures. At first, his artistic flair is a shear delight for everyone. But soon, distrust of his otherness reasserts itself, bringing a conflict with tragic consequences.

Depp is marvelous in the title role, a Buster Keaton sprite who lets his sad, sad eyes do most of the talking. (I'd like to note, with pleasure, that Johnny has since continued to develop his skills as a "silent" comic in 1993's *Benny & Joon*). But the film really isn't his. It is Tim Burton, the bizarre misfit lad from the wilds of

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Burbank, who is the real star of *Edward Scissorhands*. His spirit seems to be imbued throughout.

And now, Mr. Burton is sufficiently recognized that his name can go above the title. (And, more importantly, he can parlay his success into creative controls like "final cut" power.) An example of this kind of project is 1993's *Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas*.

Burton isn't, however, the director of this recent stop-motion animated feature. Those honors go to stop-motion (MTV, Pillsbury Doughboy) wiz, Henry Selick. Yet the story behind the making of *Nightmare* illustrates just how personal the lonely, misunderstood Burton hero is.

Tim, a local lad, attended CalArts on a Disney fellowship and went to work for the studio as an animator soon after graduation. Trouble is, he never fit in. Burton's macabre sensibilities were not exactly simpatico with that cute, perky Disney groove. Assigned to *The Fox and the Hound* project, he found it impossible to produce rolly-polly cunning critters.

Disney kindly kept him on. But soon, he realized the studio wasn't interested in actually *doing* anything with his art and ideas. These included a story idea Tim originally proposed as a holiday TV special. It would be the story of a Grinch with a good heart: The Pumpkin King of Halloween, Jack Skellington, who became so enthusiastic when he discovered Christmas that he decided to do his own horrific take on ho-ho-ho.

Burton did extensive artwork and some storyboarding in 1982. And his cohort, Rick Heinrichs, did a model of spindly Jack. Disney was less than thrilled, and all three networks passed. A couple of years later, Burton tired of biding his time at Disney, and left for Warner Brothers and feature fame.

In 1989, he asked his agent to disinter his *Nightmare* story, buried in the archives at Disney. And, no surprise, Disney was a lot more interested in his work, now that Tim's twisted psyche had produced a movie grossing over 400 mil. worldwide.

A deal was struck. An animated feature went into two years of painstaking production. And the end result is the finest example of stop-motion filmmaking I have ever seen. Unlike the awkward, stiff, sadly unanimated animation I remember from the stop-motion TV fables of my youth, *Nightmare* is state-of-the-art gorgeous.

The puppet characters of *Nightmare* are fully realized and more expressive than most actors I've seen. This was accomplished through ex-

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acting armature techniques and a wide range of artistic headgames. A dozen puppets and nearly 400 heads, each with a slightly different facial expression, were used to create the hero, Jack, alone.

All told there are 74 characters (figures) that populate the Halloweentown, Christmastown, and human homesteads of the story. And all operate upon vivid 3-D settings photographed and lit in a manner usually reserved for live-action moviemaking.

Technically, the film is eye-popping. The storyline is, perhaps, not as complex as it might have been in a feature-length movie. But I must say that I was at least as intrigued by the character of Sally (voiced by Catherine O'Hara) as I was by the skeletal man she loves, Jack (Chris Sarandon for speaking, singing voice by Danny Elfman).

Sally is Raggedy Ann by way of the Bride of Frankenstein. She is as much driven by her dreams as old Jack is. Yet she is female, practically powerless, and seldom even listened to. The property of the mad scientist (voiced by William Hickey) who reanimated her, she refuses to suffer her servitude gladly. But she can't fully fathom the concept of independence, either. (She seems destined, always, to be some guy's doll.)

Her character is a study in feminine passive resistance coupled with a lack of self-esteem. She'll use her herbal skills to knock out her possessive owner and escape, only to return to him later. Her physical bravery, which is considerable, often amounts to self-mutilation. To accomplish goals with male characters, she's not above using her body — and to be all things to all men she's sometimes forced to split herself literally into pieces.

A troubling allegory, that. Much more so than the "bloom where you're planted" lesson that Jack must learn. But at least Jack is in line with all the Burton heroes who came before him, who were obsessive-compulsive twist-tops with a genuine creative spark.

And Tim Burton seems to be that kind of fellow, himself. But that doesn't make him an auteur. It makes him a man with vision, who has managed to gather like-minded (out-of-their-minded) artistes to his side. Tim Burton films are distinctive not just because of Tim Burton. Look at the credits on his movies. And you'll see familiar names. And I don't just mean Beetlejuice playing Batman.

Many of the behind-the-scene talents on *Nightmare*, including the film's director, Harry Selick, have known Burton since his frustrating

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apprenticeship at Disney. Danny Elfman — a very gifted composer, indeed! — has scored every feature film Tim Burton ever made, including the wonderful songs and score for *Nightmare*. (And he sings a fabulous Jack, too.)

Producer Denise Di Novi, who specializes in what we could call the off-beat, headed Tim Burton productions from 1989-92 and continues to produce projects for Burton today. Caroline Thompson, *Nightmare*'s screenwriter, also did *Edward Scissorhands*. And Michael McDowell, who adapted Burton's *Nightmare* story, co-wrote the screenplay for *Beetlejuice*.

You see the pattern here. This too, is art by committee. But it is a committee aligned with a talented young filmmaker with a gift for the wondrous strange.

One man (or one woman) cannot make a movie these days. But as long as Tim Burton and his band of merry mavericks are in Hollywood, there might just be something worth watching.

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Our final story in this issue inspired Barclay Shaw's striking cover. "The Remoras" is a hard sf story only Robert Reed could write. Bob most recently appeared in our February, 1994, issue, and his short story, "Coffins," will be reprinted in The Best of Fantasy and Science Fiction *this fall.*

The Remoras

By Robert Reed

QUEE LEE'S APARTMENT covered several hectares within one of the human districts, some thousand kilometers beneath the ship's hull. It wasn't a luxury unit by any measure. Truly wealthy people owned as much as a cubic kilometer for themselves and their entourages. But it had been her home since she had come on board, for more centuries than she could count, its hallways and large rooms as comfortable to her as her own body.

The garden room was a favorite. She was enjoying its charms one afternoon, lying nude beneath a false sky and sun, eyes closed and nothing to hear but the splash of fountains and the prattle of little birds. Suddenly her apartment interrupted the peace, announcing a visitor. "He has come for Perri, miss. He claims it's most urgent."

"Perri isn't here," she replied, soft gray eyes opening. "Unless he's hiding from both of us, I suppose."

"No, miss. He is not." A brief pause, then the voice said, "I have

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explained this to the man, but he refuses to leave. His name is Orleans. He claims that Perri owes him a considerable sum of money."

What had her husband done now? Quee Lee could guess, halfway smiling as she sat upright. *Oh, Perri....won't you learn...?* She would have to dismiss this Orleans fellow herself, spooking him with a good hard stare. She rose and dressed in an emerald sarong, then walked the length of her apartment, never hurrying, commanding the front door to open at the last moment but leaving the security screen intact. And she was ready for someone odd. Even someone sordid, knowing Perri. Yet she didn't expect to see a shiny lifesuit more than two meters tall and nearly half as wide, and she had never imagined such a face gazing down at her with mismatched eyes. It took her a long moment to realize this was a Remora. An authentic Remora was standing in the public walkway, his vivid round face watching her. The flesh was orange with diffuse black blotches that might or might not be cancers, and a lipless, toothless mouth seemed to flow into a grin. What would bring a Remora here? They never, never came down here...!

"I'm Orleans." The voice was sudden and deep, slightly muted by the security screen. It came from a speaker hidden somewhere on the thick neck, telling her, "I need help, miss. I'm sorry to disturb you...but you see, I'm desperate. I don't know where else to turn."

Quee Lee knew about Remoras. She had seen them and even spoken to a few, although those conversations were eons ago and she couldn't remember their substance. Such strange creatures. Stranger than most aliens, even if they possessed human souls....

"Miss?"

Quee Lee thought of herself as being a good person. Yet she couldn't help but feel repelled, the floor rolling beneath her and her breath stopping short. Orleans was a human being, one of her own species. True, his genetics had been transformed by hard radiations. And yes, he normally lived apart from ordinary people like her. But inside him was a human mind, tough and potentially immortal. Quee Lee blinked and remembered that she had compassion as well as charity for everyone, even aliens...and she managed to sputter, "Come in." She said, "If you wish, please do," and with that invitation, her apartment deactivated the invisible screen.

"Thank you, miss." The Remora walked slowly, almost clumsily, his lifesuit making a harsh grinding noise in the knees and hips. That wasn't

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normal, she realized. Orleans should be graceful, his suit powerful, serving him as an elaborate exoskeleton.

"Would you like anything?" she asked foolishly. Out of habit.

"No, thank you," he replied, his voice nothing but pleasant.

Of course. Remoras ate and drank only self-made concoctions. They were permanently sealed inside their lifesuits, functioning as perfectly self-contained organisms. Food was synthesized, water recycled, and they possessed a religious sense of purity and independence.

"I don't wish to bother you, miss. I'll be brief."

His politeness was a minor surprise. Remoras typically were distant, even arrogant. But Orleans continued to smile, watching her. One eye was a muscular pit filled with thick black hairs, and she assumed those hairs were light sensitive. Like an insect's compound eye, each one might build part of an image. By contrast, its mate was ordinary, white and fishy with a foggy black center. Mutations could do astonishing things. An accelerated, partly controlled evolution was occurring inside that suit, even while Orleans stood before her, boots stomping on the stone floor, a single spark arcing toward her.

Orleans said, "I know this is embarrassing for you — "

"No, no," she offered.

" — and it makes me uncomfortable too. I wouldn't have come down here if it wasn't necessary."

"Perri's gone," she repeated, "and I don't know when he'll be back. I'm sorry."

"Actually," said Orleans, "I was hoping he would be gone."

"Did you?"

"Though I'd have come either way."

Quee Lee's apartment, loyal and watchful, wouldn't allow anything nasty to happen to her. She took a step forward, closing some of the distance. "This is about money being owed? Is that right?"

"Yes, miss."

"For what, if I might ask?"

Orleans didn't explain in clear terms. "Think of it as an old gambling debt." More was involved, he implied. "A very old debt, I'm afraid, and Perri's refused me a thousand times."

She could imagine it. Her husband had his share of failings, incompetence and a self-serving attitude among them. She loved Perri in a controlled

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way, but his flaws were obvious. "I'm sorry," she replied, "but I'm not responsible for his debts." She made herself sound hard, knowing it was best. "I hope you didn't come all this way because you heard he was married." Married to a woman of some means, she thought to herself. In secret.

"No, no, no!" The grotesque face seemed injured. Both eyes became larger, and a thin tongue, white as ice, licked at the lipless edge of the mouth. "Honestly, we don't follow the news about passengers. I just assumed Perri was living with someone. I know him, you see...my hope was to come and make my case to whomever I found, winning a comrade. An ally. Someone who might become my advocate." A hopeful pause, then he said, "When Perri does come here, will you explain to him what's right and what is not? Can you, please?" Another pause, then he added, "Even a lowly Remora knows the difference between right and wrong, miss."

That wasn't fair, calling himself lowly. And he seemed to be painting her as some flavor of bigot, which she wasn't. She didn't look at him as lowly, and morality wasn't her private possession. Both of them were human, after all. Their souls were linked by a charming and handsome, manipulative user...by her darling husband...and Quee Lee felt a sudden anger directed at Perri, almost shuddering in front of this stranger.

"Miss?"

"How much?" she asked. "How much does he owe you, and how soon will you need it?"

Orleans answered the second question first, lifting an arm with a sickly whine coming from his shoulder. "Can you hear it?" he asked. As if she were deaf. "My seals need to be replaced, or at least refurbished. Yesterday, if possible." The arm bent, and the elbow whined. "I already spent my savings rebuilding my reactor."

Quee Lee knew enough about lifesuits to appreciate his circumstances. Remoras worked on the ship's hull, standing in the open for hours and days at a time. A broken seal was a disaster. Any tiny opening would kill most of his body, and his suffering mind would fall into a protective coma. Left exposed and vulnerable, Orleans would be at the mercy of radiation storms and comet showers. Yes, she understood. A balky suit was an unacceptable hazard on top of lesser hazards, and what could she say?

She felt a deep empathy for the man.

Orleans seemed to take a breath, then he said, "Perri owes me fifty-two

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thousand credits, miss."

"I see." She swallowed and said, "My name is Quee Lee."

"Quee Lee," he repeated. "Yes, miss."

"As soon as Perri comes home, I'll discuss this with him. I promise you."

"I would be grateful if you did."

"I will."

The ugly mouth opened, and she saw blotches of green and gray-blue against a milky throat. Those were cancers or perhaps strange new organs. She couldn't believe she was in the company of a Remora — the strangest sort of human — yet despite every myth, despite tales of courage and even recklessness, Orleans appeared almost fragile. He even looked scared, she realized. That wet orange face shook as if in despair, then came the awful grinding noise as he turned away, telling her, "Thank you, Quee Lee. For your time and patience, and for everything."

Fifty-two thousand credits!

She could have screamed. She would scream when she was alone, she promised herself. Perri had done this man a great disservice, and he'd hear about it when he graced her with his company again. A patient person, yes, and she could tolerate most of his flaws. But not now. Fifty thousand credits was no fortune, and it would allow Orleans to refurbish his lifesuit, making him whole and healthy again. Perhaps she could get in touch with Perri first, speeding up the process...?

Orleans was through her front door, turning to say good-bye. False sunshine made his suit shine, and his faceplate darkened to where she couldn't see his features anymore. He might have any face, and what did a face mean? Waving back at him, sick to her stomach, she calculated what fifty-two thousand credits meant in concrete terms, to her....

...wondering if she should...?

But no, she decided. She just lacked the required compassion. She was a particle short, if that, ordering the security screen to engage again, helping to mute that horrid grinding of joints as the Remora shuffled off for home.

The ship had many names, many designations, but to its long-term passengers and crew it was referred to as *the ship.* No other starship could be confused for it. Not in volume, nor in history.

The ship was old by every measure. A vanished humanoid race had built

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it, probably before life arose on Earth, then abandoned it for no obvious reason. Experts claimed it had begun as a sunless world, one of the countless jupiters that sprinkled the cosmos. The builders had used the world's own hydrogen to fuel enormous engines, accelerating it over millions of years while stripping away its gaseous exterior. Today's ship was the leftover core, much modified by its builders and humans. Its metal and rock interior was laced with passageways and sealed environments, fuel tanks and various ports. There was room enough for hundreds of billions of passengers, though there were only a fraction that number now. And its hull was a special armor made from hyperfibers, kilometers thick and tough enough to withstand most high-velocity impacts.

The ship had come from outside the galaxy, passing into human space long ago. It was claimed as salvage, explored by various means, then refurbished to the best of its new owners' abilities. A corporation was formed; a promotion was born. The ancient engines were coaxed to life, changing the ship's course. Then tickets were sold, both to humans and alien species. Novelty and adventure were the lures. One circuit around the Milky Way; a half-million-year voyage touring the star-rich spiral arms. It was a long span, even for immortal humans. But people like Quee Lee had enough money and patience. That's why she purchased her apartment with a portion of her savings. This voyage wouldn't remain novel for long, she knew. Three or four circuits at most, and then what? People would want something else new and glancingly dangerous. Wasn't that the way it always was?

Quee Lee had no natural lifespan. Her ancestors had improved themselves in a thousand ways, erasing the aging process. Fragile DNAs were replaced with better genetic machinery. Tailoring allowed a wide-range of useful proteins and enzymes and powerful repair mechanisms. Immune systems were nearly perfect; diseases were extinct. Normal life couldn't damage a person in any measurable way. And even a tragic accident wouldn't need to be fatal, Quee Lee's body and mind able to withstand frightening amounts of abuse.

But Remoras, despite those same gifts, did not live ordinary lives. They worked on the open hull, each of them encased in a lifesuit. The suits afforded extra protection and a standard environment, each one possessing a small fusion plant and redundant recycling systems. Hull life was dangerous in the best times. The ship's shields and laser watchdogs couldn't stop every bit of

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interstellar grit. And every large impact meant someone had to make repairs. The ship's builders had used sophisticated robots, but they proved too tired after several billions of years on the job. It was better to promote — or demote — members of the human crew. The original scheme was to share the job, brief stints fairly dispersed. Even the captains were to don the lifesuits, stepping into the open when it was safest, patching craters with fresh-made hyperfibers....

Fairness didn't last. A kind of subculture arose, and the first Remoras took the hull as their province. Those early Remoras learned how to survive the huge radiation loads. They trained themselves and their offspring to control their damaged bodies. Tough genetics mutated, and they embraced their mutations. If an eye was struck blind, perhaps by some queer cancer, then a good Remora would evolve a new eye. Perhaps a hair was light-sensitive, and its owner, purely by force of will, would culture that hair and interface it with the surviving optic nerve, producing an eye more durable than the one it replaced. Or so Quee Lee had heard, in passing, from people who acted as if they knew about such things.

Remoras, she had been told, were happy to look grotesque. In their culture, strange faces and novel organs were the measures of success. And since disaster could happen anytime, without warning, it was unusual for any Remora to live long. At least in her sense of long. Orleans could be a fourth or fifth generation Remora, for all she knew. A child barely fifty centuries old. *For all she knew.* Which was almost nothing, she realized, returning to her garden room and undressing, lying down with her eyes closed and the light baking her. Remoras were important, even essential people, yet she felt wholly ignorant. And ignorance was wrong, she knew. Not as wrong as owing one of them money, but still....

This life of hers seemed so ordinary, set next to Orleans' life. Comfortable and ordinary, and she almost felt ashamed.

PERRI FAILED to come home that next day, and the next. Then it was ten days, Quee Lee having sent messages to his usual haunts and no reply. She had been careful not to explain why she wanted him. And this was nothing too unusual, Perri probably wandering somewhere new and Quee Lee skilled at waiting, her days accented with visits from friends and parties thrown for any

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small reason. It was her normal life, never anything but pleasant; yet she found herself thinking about Orleans, imagining him walking on the open hull with his seals breaking, his strange body starting to boil away...that poor man...!

Taking the money to Orleans was an easy decision. Quee Lee had more than enough. It didn't seem like a large sum until she had it converted into black-and-white chips. But wasn't it better to have Perri owing her instead of owing a Remora? She was in a better place to recoup the debt; and besides, she doubted that her husband could raise that money now. Knowing him, he probably had a number of debts, to humans and aliens both; and for the nth time, she wondered how she'd ever let Perri charm her. What was she thinking, agreeing to this crazy union?

Quee Lee was old even by immortal measures. She was so old she could barely remember her youth, her tough neurons unable to embrace her entire life. Maybe that's why Perri had seemed like a blessing. He was ridiculously young and wore his youth well, gladly sharing his enthusiasms and energies. He was a good, untaxing lover; he could listen when it was important; and he had never tried milking Quee Lee of her money. Besides, he was a challenge. No doubt about it. Maybe her friends didn't approve of him — a few close ones were openly critical — but to a woman of her vintage, in the middle of a five thousand century voyage, Perri was something fresh and new and remarkable. And Quee Lee's old friends, quite suddenly, seemed a little fossilized by comparison.

"I love to travel," Perri had explained, his gently handsome face capable of endless smiles. "I was born on the ship, did you know? Just weeks after my parents came on board. They were riding only as far as a colony world, but I stayed behind. My choice." He had laughed, eyes gazing into the false sky of her ceiling. "Do you know what I want to do? I want to see the entire ship, walk every hallway and cavern. I want to explore every body of water, meet every sort of alien — "

"Really?"

"— and even visit their quarters. Their homes." Another laugh and that infectious smile. "I just came back from a low-gravity district, six thousand kilometers below. There's a kind of spidery creature down there. You should see them, love! I can't do them justice by telling you they're graceful, and seeing holos isn't much better."

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She had been impressed. Who else did she know who could tolerate aliens, what with their strange odors and their impenetrable minds? Perri was remarkable, no doubt about it. Even her most critical friends admitted that much, and despite their grumbles, they'd want to hear the latest Perri adventure as told by his wife.

"I'll stay on board forever, if I can manage it."

She had laughed, asking, "Can you afford it?"

"Badly," he had admitted. "But I'm paid up through this circuit, at least. Minus day-by-day expenses, but that's all right. Believe me, when you've got millions of wealthy souls in one place, there's always a means of making a living."

"Legal means?"

"Glancingly so." He had a rogue's humor, all right. Yet later, in a more sober mood, he had admitted, "I do have enemies, my love. I'm warning you. Like anyone, I've made my share of mistakes — my youthful indiscretions — but at least I'm honest about them."

Indiscretions, perhaps. Yet he had done nothing to earn her animosity.

"We should marry," Perri had proposed. "Why not? We like each other's company, yet we seem to weather our time apart too. What do you think? Frankly, I don't think you need a partner who shadows you day and night. Do you, Quee Lee?"

She didn't. True enough.

"A small tidy marriage, complete with rules," he had assured her. "I get a home base, and you have your privacy, plus my considerable entertainment value." A big long laugh, then he had added, "I promise. You'll be the first to hear my latest tales. And I'll never be any kind of leech, darling. With you, I will be the perfect gentleman."

Quee Lee carried the credit chips in a secret pouch, traveling to the tube-car station and riding one of the vertical tubes toward the hull. She had looked up the name *Orleans* in the crew listings. The only Orleans lived at Port Beta, no mention of him being a Remora or not. The ports were vast facilities where taxi craft docked with the ship, bringing new passengers from nearby alien worlds. It was easier to accelerate and decelerate those kilometer-long needles. The ship's own engines did nothing but make the occasional course correction, avoiding dust clouds while keeping them on their circular course.

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It had been forever since Quee Lee had visited a port. And today there wasn't even a taxi to be seen, all of them off hunting for more paying customers. The nonRemora crew — the captains, mates and so on — had little work at the moment, apparently hiding from her. She stood at the bottom of the port — a lofty cylinder capped with a kilometer-thick hatch of top-grade hyperfibers. The only other tourists were aliens, some kind of fishy species encased in bubbles of liquid water or ammonia. The bubbles rolled past her. It was like standing in a school of small tuna, their sharp chatter audible and Quee Lee unable to decipher any of it. Were they mocking her? She had no clue, and it made her all the more frustrated. They could be making terrible fun of her. She felt lost and more than a little homesick all at once.

By contrast, the first Remora seemed normal. Walking without any grinding sounds, it covered ground at an amazing pace. Quee Lee had to run to catch it. To catch her. Something about the lifesuit was feminine, and a female voice responded to Quee Lee's shouts.

"What what what?" asked the Remora. "I'm busy!"

Gasping, Quee Lee asked, "Do you know Orleans?"

"Orleans?"

"I need to find him. It's quite important." Then she wondered if something terrible had happened, her arriving too late —

"I do know someone named Orleans, yes." The face had comma-shaped eyes, huge and black and bulging, and the mouth blended into a slit-like nose. Her skin was silvery, odd bunched fibers running beneath the surface. Black hair showed along the top of the faceplate, except at second glance it wasn't hair. It looked more like ropes soaked in oil, the strands wagging with a slow stately pace.

The mouth smiled. The normal-sounding voice said, "Actually, Orleans is one of my closest friends!"

True? Or was she making a joke?

"I really have to find him," Quee Lee confessed. "Can you help me?"

"Can I help you?" The strange mouth smiled, gray pseudoteeth looking big as thumbnails, the gums as silver as her skin. "I'll take you to him. Does that constitute help?" And Quee Lee found herself following, walking onto a lifting disk without railing, the Remora standing in the center and waving to the old woman. "Come closer. Orleans is up there." A skyward gesture.

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"A good long way, and I don't think you'd want to try it alone. Would you?"

"Relax," Orleans advised.

She thought she was relaxed, except then she found herself nodding, breathing deeply and feeling a tension as it evaporated. The ascent had taken ages, it seemed. Save for the rush of air moving past her ears, it had been soundless. The disk had no sides at all — a clear violation of safety regulations — and Quee Lee had grasped one of the Remora's shiny arms, needing a handhold, surprised to feel rough spots in the hyperfiber. Minuscule impacts had left craters too tiny to see. Remoras, she had realized, were very much like the ship itself — enclosed biospheres taking abuse as they streaked through space.

"Better?" asked Orleans.

"Yes. Better." A thirty kilometer ride through the port, holding tight to a Remora. And now this. She and Orleans were inside some tiny room not five hundred meters from the vacuum. Did Orleans live here? She nearly asked, looking at the bare walls and stubby furniture, deciding it was too spare, too ascetic to be anyone's home. Even his. Instead she asked him, "How are *you?*"

"Tired. Fresh off my shift, and devastated."

The face had changed. The orange pigments were softer now, and both eyes were the same sickening hair-filled pits. How clear was his vision? How did he transplant cells from one eye to the other? There had to be mechanisms, reliable tricks...and she found herself feeling ignorant and glad of it....

"What do you want, Quee Lee?"

She swallowed. "Perri came home, and I brought what he owes you."

Orleans looked surprised, then the cool voice said, "Good. Wonderful!"

She produced the chips, his shiny palm accepting them. The elbow gave a harsh growl, and she said, "I hope this helps."

"My mood already is improved," he promised.

What else? She wasn't sure what to say now.

Then Orleans told her, "I should thank you somehow. Can I give you something for your trouble? How about a tour?" One eye actually winked at her, hairs contracting into their pit and nothing left visible but a tiny red pore. "A tour," he repeated. "A walk outside? We'll find you a lifesuit. We keep them here in case a captain comes for an inspection." A big deep laugh,

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then he added, "Once every thousand years, they do! Whether we need it or not!"

What was he saying? She had heard him, and she hadn't.

A smile and another wink, and he said, "I'm serious. Would you like to go for a little stroll?"

"I've never...I don't know...!"

"Safe as safe can be." Whatever that meant. "Listen, this is the safest place for a jaunt. We're behind the leading face, which means impacts are nearly impossible. But we're not close to the engines and their radiations either." Another laugh, and he added, "Oh, you'll get a dose of radiation, but nothing important. You're tough, Quee Lee. Does your fancy apartment have an autodoc?"

"Of course."

"Well, then."

She wasn't scared, at least in any direct way. What Quee Lee felt was excitement and fear born of excitement, nothing in her experience to compare with what was happening. She was a creature of habits, rigorous and ancient habits, and she had no way to know how she'd respond *out there.* No habit had prepared her for this moment.

"Here," said her gracious host. "Come in here."

No excuse occurred to her. They were in a deep closet full of lifesuits — this was some kind of locker room, apparently — and she let Orleans select one and dismantle it with his growling joints. "It opens and closes, unlike mine," he explained. "It doesn't have all the redundant systems either. Otherwise, it's the same."

On went the legs, the torso and arms and helmet; she banged the helmet against the low ceiling, then struck the wall with her first step.

"Follow me," Orleans advised, "and keep it slow."

Wise words. They entered some sort of tunnel that zigzagged toward space, ancient stairs fashioned for a nearly human gait. Each bend had an invisible field that held back the ship's thinning atmosphere. They began speaking by radio, voices close, and she noticed how she could feel through the suit, its pseudoneurons interfacing with her own. Here gravity was stronger than earth-standard, yet despite her added bulk she moved with ease, limbs humming, her helmet striking the ceiling as she climbed. Thump, and thump. She couldn't help herself.

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Orleans laughed pleasantly, the sound close and intimate. "You're doing fine, Quee Lee. Relax."

Hearing her name gave her a dilute courage.

"Remember," he said, "your servomotors are potent. Lifesuits make motions large. Don't overcontrol, and don't act cocky."

She wanted to succeed. More than anything in recent memory, she wanted everything as close to perfect as possible.

"Concentrate," he said.

Then he told her, "That's better, yes."

They came to a final turn, then a hatch, Orleans pausing and turning, his syrupy mouth making a preposterous smile. "Here we are. We'll go outside for just a little while, okay?" A pause, then he added, "When you go home, tell your husband what you've done. Amaze him!"

"I will," she whispered.

And he opened the hatch with an arm — the abrasive sounds audible across the radio, but distant — and a bright colored glow washed over them. "Beautiful," the Remora observed. "Isn't it beautiful, Quee Lee?"

Perri didn't return home for several more weeks, and when he arrived — "I was rafting Cloud Canyon, love and didn't get your messages!" — Quee Lee realized that she wasn't going to tell him about her adventure. Nor about the money. She'd wait for a better time, a weak moment, when Perri's guard was down. "What's so important, love? You sounded urgent." She told him it was nothing, that she'd missed him and been worried. How was the rafting? Who went with him? Perri told her, "Tweewits. Big hulking baboons, in essence." He smiled until she smiled too. He looked thin and tired; but that night, with minimal prompting, he found the energy to make love to her twice. And the second time was special enough that she was left wondering how she could so willingly live without sex for long periods. It could be the most amazing pleasure.

Perri slept, dreaming of artificial rivers roaring through artificial canyons; and Quee Lee sat up in bed, in the dark, whispering for her apartment to show her the view above Port Beta. She had it projected into her ceiling, twenty meters overhead, the shimmering aurora changing colors as force fields wrestled with every kind of spaceborn hazard.

"What do you think, Quee Lee?"

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Orleans had asked the question, and she answered it again, in a soft awed voice. "Lovely." She shut her eyes, remembering how the hull itself had stretched off into the distance, flat and gray, bland yet somehow serene. "It is lovely."

"And even better up front, on the prow," her companion had maintained. "The fields there are thicker, stronger. And the big lasers keep hitting the comets tens of millions of kilometers from us, softening them up for us." He had given a little laugh, telling her, "You can almost feel the ship moving when you look up from the prow. Honest."

She had shivered inside her lifesuit, more out of pleasure than fear. Few passengers ever came out on the hull. They were breaking rules, no doubt. Even inside the taxi ships, you were protected by a hull. But not up there. Up there she'd felt exposed, practically naked. And maybe Orleans had measured her mood, watching her face with the flickering pulses, finally asking her, "Do you know the story of the first Remora?"

Did she? She wasn't certain.

He told it, his voice smooth and quiet. "Her name was Wune," he began. "On Earth, it's rumored, she was a criminal, a registered habitual criminal. Signing on as a crew mate helped her escape a stint of psychological realignment — "

"What crimes?"

"Do they matter?" A shake of the round head. "Bad ones, and that's too much said. The point is that Wune came here without rank, glad for the opportunity, and like any good mate, she took her turns out on the hull."

Quee Lee had nodded, staring off at the far horizon.

"She was pretty, like you. Between shifts, she did typical typicals. She explored the ship and had affairs of the heart and grieved the affairs that went badly. Like you, Quee Lee, she was smart. And after just a few centuries on board, Wune could see the trends. She saw how the captains were avoiding their shifts on the hull. And how certain people, guilty of small offenses, were pushed into double-shifts in their stead. All so that our captains didn't have to accept the tiniest, fairest risks."

Status. Rank. Privilege. She could understand these things, probably too well.

"Wune rebelled," Orleans had said, pride in the voice. "But instead of overthrowing the system, she conquered by embracing it. By transforming

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what she embraced." A soft laugh. "This lifesuit of mine? She built its prototype with its semi-forever seals and the hyperefficient recyke systems. She made a suit that she'd never have to leave, then she began to live on the hull, in the open, sometimes alone for years at a time."

"Alone?"

"A prophet's contemplative life." A fond glance at the smooth gray terrain. "She stopped having her body purged of cancers and other damage. She let her face — her beautiful face — become speckled with dead tissues. Then she taught herself to manage her mutations, with discipline and strength. Eventually she picked a few friends without status, teaching them her tricks and explaining the peace and purpose she had found while living up here, contemplating the universe without obstructions."

Without obstructions indeed!

"A few hundred became the First Generation. Attrition convinced our great captains to allow children, and the Second Generation numbered in the thousands. By the Third, we were officially responsible for the ship's exterior and the deadliest parts of its engines. We had achieved a quiet conquest of a world-sized realm, and today we number in the low millions!"

She remembered sighing, asking, "What happened to Wune?"

"An heroic death," he had replied. "A comet swarm was approaching. A repair team was caught on the prow, their shuttle dead and useless — "

"Why were they there if a swarm was coming?"

"Patching a crater, of course. Remember. The prow can withstand almost any likely blow, but if comets were to strike on top of one another, unlikely as that sounds — "

"A disaster," she muttered.

"For the passengers below, yes." A strange slow smile. "Wune died trying to bring them a fresh shuttle. She was vaporized under a chunk of ice and rock, in an instant."

"I'm sorry." Whispered.

"Wune was my great-great-grandmother," the man had added. "And no, she didn't name us Remoras. That originally was an insult, some captain responsible. Remoras are ugly fish that cling to sharks. Not a pleasing image, but Wune embraced the word. To us it means spiritual fulfillment, independence and a powerful sense of self. Do you know what I am, Quee Lee? I'm a god inside this suit of mine. I rule in ways you can't appreciate. You can't

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imagine how it is, having utter control over my body, my self...!"

She had stared at him, unable to speak.

A shiny hand had lifted, thick fingers against his faceplate. "My eyes? You're fascinated by my eyes, aren't you?"

A tiny nod. "Yes."

"Do you know how I sculpted them?"

"No."

"Tell me, Quee Lee. How do you close your hand?"

She had made a fist, as if to show him how.

"But which neurons fire? Which muscles contract?" A mild, patient laugh, then he had added, "How can you manage something that you can't describe in full?"

She had said, "It's habit, I guess...."

"Exactly!" A larger laugh. "I have habits too. For instance, I can willfully spread mutations using metastasized cells. I personally have thousands of years of practice, plus all those useful mechanisms that I inherited from Wune and the others. It's as natural as your making the fist."

"But my hand doesn't change its real shape," she had countered.

"Transformation is my habit, and it's why my life is so much richer than yours." He had given her a wink just then, saying, "I can't count the times I've re-evolved my eyes."

Quee Lee looked up at her bedroom ceiling now, at a curtain of blue glows dissolving into pink. In her mind, she replayed the moment.

"You think Remoras are vile, ugly monsters," Orleans had said. "Now don't deny it. I won't let you deny it."

She hadn't made a sound.

"When you saw me standing at your door? When you saw that a Remora had come to *your* home? All of that ordinary blood of yours drained out of your face. You looked so terribly pale and weak, Quee Lee. Horrified!"

She couldn't deny it. Not then or now.

"Which of us has the richest life, Quee Lee? And be objective. Is it you or is it me?"

She pulled her bedsheets over herself, shaking a little bit.

"You or me?"

"Me," she whispered, but in that word was doubt. Just the flavor of it. Then Perri stirred, rolling toward her with his face trying to waken. Quee Lee

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had a last glance at the projected sky, then had it quelched. Then Perri was grinning, blinking and reaching for her, asking:

"Can't you sleep, love?"

"No," she admitted. Then she said, "Come here, darling."

"Well, well," he laughed. "Aren't you in a mood?"

Absolutely. A feverish mood, her mind leaping from subject to subject, without order, every thought intense and sudden, Perri on top of her and her old-fashioned eyes gazing up at the darkened ceiling, still seeing the powerful surges of changing colors that obscured the bright dusting of stars.

THEY TOOK a second honeymoon, Quee Lee's treat. They traveled halfway around the ship, visiting a famous resort beside a small tropical sea; and for several months, they enjoyed the scenery and beaches, bone-white sands dropping into azure waters where fancy corals and fancier fishes lived. Every night brought a different sky, the ship supplying stored images of nebulas and strange suns; and they made love in the oddest places, in odd ways, strangers sometimes coming upon them and pausing to watch.

Yet she felt detached somehow, hovering overhead like an observer. Did Remoras have sex? she wondered. And if so, how? And how did they make their children? One day, Perri strapped on a gill and swam alone to the reef, leaving Quee Lee free to do research. Remoran sex, if it could be called that, was managed with electrical stimulation through the suits themselves. Reproduction was something else, children conceived in vitro, samples of their parents' genetics married and grown inside a hyperfiber envelope. The envelope was expanded as needed. Birth came with the first independent fusion plant. What an incredible way to live, she realized; but then again, there were many human societies that seemed bizarre. Some refused immortality. Some had married computers or lived in a narcotic haze. There were many, many spiritual splinter groups...only she couldn't learn much about the Remoran faith. Was their faith secret? And if so, why had she been allowed a glimpse of their private world?

Perri remained pleasant and attentive.

"I know this is work for you," she told him, "and you've been a delight, darling. Old women appreciate these attentions."

"Oh, you're not old!" A wink and smile, and he pulled her close. "And

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it's not work at all. Believe me!"

They returned home soon afterward, and Quee Lee was disappointed with her apartment. It was just as she remembered it, and the sameness was depressing. Even the garden room failed to brighten her mood...and she found herself wondering if she'd ever lived anywhere but here, the stone walls cold and closing in on her.

Perri asked, "What's the matter, love?"

She said nothing.

"Can I help, darling?"

"I forgot to tell you something," she began. "A friend of yours visited...oh, it was almost a year ago."

The roguish charm surfaced, reliable and nonplussed. "Which friend?"

"Orleans."

And Perri didn't respond at first, hearing the name and not allowing his expression to change. He stood motionless, not quite looking at her; and Quee Lee noticed a weakness in the mouth and something glassy about the smiling eyes. She felt uneasy, almost asking him what was wrong. Then Perri said, "What did Orleans want?" His voice was too soft, almost a whisper. A sideways glance, and he muttered, "Orleans came here?" He couldn't quite believe what she was saying....

"You owed him some money," she replied.

Perri didn't speak, didn't seem to hear anything.

"Perri?"

He swallowed and said, "Owed?"

"I paid him."

"But...but what happened...?"

She told him and she didn't. She mentioned the old seals and some other salient details, then in the middle of her explanation, all at once, something obvious and awful occurred to her. What if there hadn't been a debt? She gasped, asking, "You did owe him the money, didn't you?"

"How much did you say it was?"

She told him again.

He nodded. He swallowed and straightened his back, then managed to say, "I'll pay you back...as soon as possible...."

"Is there any hurry?" She took his hand, telling him, "I haven't made noise until now, have I?" Don't worry." A pause. "I just wonder how you

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could owe him so much?"

Perri shook his head. "I'll give you five thousand now, maybe six...and I'll raise the rest. Soon as I can, I promise."

She said, "Fine."

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"How do you know a Remora?"

He seemed momentarily confused by the question. Then he managed to say, "You know me. A taste for the exotic, and all that."

"You lost the money gambling? Is that what happened?"

"I'd nearly forgotten, it was so long ago." He summoned a smile and some of the old charm. "You should know, darling...those Remoras aren't anything like you and me. Be very careful with them, please."

She didn't mention her jaunt on the hull. Everything was old news anyway, and why had she brought it up in the first place? Perri kept promising to pay her back. He announced he was leaving tomorrow, needing to find some nameless people who owed him. The best he could manage was fifteen hundred credits. "A weak down payment, I know." Quee Lee thought of reassuring him—he seemed painfully nervous—but instead she simply told him, "Have a good trip, and come home soon."

He was a darling man when vulnerable. "Soon," he promised, walking out the front door. And an hour later, Quee Lee left too, telling herself that she was going to the hull again to confront her husband's old friend. What was this mysterious debt? Why did it bother him so much? But somewhere during the long tube-car ride, before she reached Port Beta, she realized that a confrontation would just further embarrass Perri, and what cause would that serve?

"What now?" she whispered to herself.

Another walk on the hull, of course. If Orleans would allow it. If he had the time, she hoped, and the inclination.

His face had turned blue, and the eyes were larger. The pits were filled with black hairs that shone in the light, something about them distinctly amused. "I guess we could go for a stroll," said the cool voice. They were standing in the same locker room, or one just like it; Quee Lee was unsure about directions. "We could," said Orleans, "but if you want to bend the rules, why bend little ones? Why not pick the hefty ones?"

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She watched the mouth smile down at her, two little tusks showing in its corners. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Of course it'll take time," he warned. "A few months, maybe a few years...."

She had centuries, if she wanted.

"I know you," said Orleans. "You've gotten curious about me, about *us.*" Orleans moved an arm, not so much as a hum coming from the refurbished joints. "We'll make you an honorary Remora, if you're willing. We'll borrow a lifesuit, set you inside it, then transform you partway in a hurry-up fashion."

"You can? How?"

"Oh, aimed doses of radiation. Plus we'll give you some useful mutations. I'll wrap up some genes inside smart cancers, and they'll migrate to the right spots and grow...."

She was frightened and intrigued, her heart kicking harder.

"It won't happen overnight, of course. And it depends on how much you want done." A pause. "And you should know that it's not strictly legal. The captains have this attitude about putting passengers a little bit at risk."

"How much risk is there?"

Orleans said, "The transformation is easy enough, in principle. I'll call up our records, make sure of the fine points." A pause and a narrowing of the eyes. "We'll keep you asleep throughout. Intravenous feedings. That's best. You'll lie down with one body, then waken with a new one. A better one, I'd like to think. How much risk? Almost none, believe me."

She felt numb. Small and weak and numb.

"You won't be a true Remora. Your basic genetics won't be touched, I promise. But someone looking at you will think you're genuine."

For an instant, with utter clarity, Quee Lee saw herself alone on the great gray hull, walking the path of the first Remora.

"Are you interested?"

"Maybe. I am."

"You'll need a lot of interest before we can start," he warned. "We have expenses to consider, and I'll be putting my crew at risk. If the captains find out, it's a suspension without pay." He paused, then said, "Are you listening to me?"

"It's going to cost money," she whispered.

Orleans gave a figure.

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And Quee Lee was braced for a larger sum, two hundred thousand credits still large but not unbearable. She wouldn't be able to take as many trips to fancy resorts, true. Yet how could a lazy, prosaic resort compare with what she was being offered?

"You've done this before?" she asked.

He waited a moment, then said, "Not for a long time, no."

She didn't ask what seemed quite obvious, thinking of Perri and secretly smiling to herself.

"Take time," Orleans counseled. "Feel sure."

But she had already decided.

"Quee Lee?"

She looked at him, asking, "Can I have your eyes? Can you wrap them up in a smart cancer for me?"

"Certainly!" A great fluid smile emerged, framed with tusks. "Pick and choose as you wish. Anything you wish."

"The eyes," she muttered.

"They're yours," he declared, giving a little wink.

Arrangements had to be made, and what surprised her most — what she enjoyed more than the anticipation — was the subterfuge, taking money from her savings and leaving no destination, telling her apartment that she would be gone for an indeterminate time. At least a year, and perhaps much longer. Orleans hadn't put a cap on her stay with them, and what if she liked the Remoran life? Why not keep her possibilities open?

"If Perri returns?" asked the apartment.

He was to have free reign of the place, naturally. She thought she'd made herself clear —

"No, miss," the voice interrupted. "What do I tell him, if anything?"

"Tell him...tell him that I've gone exploring."

"Exploring?"

"Tell him it's my turn for a change," she declared; and she left without as much as a backward glance.

Orleans found help from the same female Remora, the one who had taken Quee Lee to him twice now. Her comma-shaped eyes hadn't changed, but the mouth was smaller and the gray teeth had turned black as obsidian.

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Quee Lee lay between them as they worked, their faces smiling but the voices tight and shrill. Not for the first time, she realized she wasn't hearing their real voices. The suits themselves were translating their wet mutterings, which is why throats and mouths could change so much without having any audible effect.

"Are you comfortable?" asked the woman. But before Quee Lee could reply, she asked, "Any last questions?"

Quee Lee was encased in the lifesuit, a sudden panic taking hold of her. "When I go home...when I'm done...how fast can I...?"

"Can you?"

"Return to my normal self."

"Cure the damage, you mean." The woman laughed gently, her expression changing from one unreadable state to another. "I don't think there's a firm answer, dear. Do you have an autodoc in your apartment? Good. Let it excise the bad and help you grow your own organs over again. As if you'd suffered a bad accident...." A brief pause. "It should take what, Orleans? Six months to be cured?"

The man said nothing, busy with certain controls inside her suit's helmet. Quee Lee could just see his face above and behind her.

"Six months and you can walk in public again."

"I don't mean it that way," Quee Lee countered, swallowed now. A pressure was building against her chest, panic becoming terror. She wanted nothing now but to be home again.

"Listen," said Orleans, then he said nothing.

Finally Quee Lee whispered, "What?"

He knelt beside her, saying, "You'll be fine. I promise."

His old confidence was missing. Perhaps he hadn't believed she would go through with this adventure. Perhaps the offer had been some kind of bluff, something no sane person would find appealing, and now he'd invent some excuse to stop everything —

— but he said, "Seals tight and ready."

"Tight and ready," echoed the woman.

Smiles appeared on both faces, though neither inspired confidence. Then Orleans was explaining: "There's only a slight, slight chance that you won't return to normal. If you should get hit by too much radiation, precipitating too many novel mutations...well, the strangeness can get buried too deeply.

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A thousand autodocs couldn't root it all out of you."

"Vestigial organs," the woman added. "Odd blemishes and the like."

"It won't happen," said Orleans.

"It won't," Quee Lee agreed.

A feeding nipple appeared before her mouth.

"Suck and sleep," Orleans told her.

She swallowed some sort of chemical broth, and the woman was saying, "No, it would take ten or fifteen centuries to make lasting marks. Unless — "

Orleans said something, snapping at her.

She laughed with a bitter sound, saying, "Oh, she's asleep...!"

And Quee Lee was asleep. She found herself in a dreamless, timeless void, her body being pricked with needles — little white pains marking every smart cancer — and it was as if nothing else existed in the universe but Quee Lee, floating in that perfect blackness while she was remade.

"How long?"

"Not so long. Seven months, almost."

Seven months. Quee Lee tried to blink and couldn't, couldn't shut the lids of her eyes. Then she tried touching her face, lifting a heavy hand and setting the palm on her faceplate, finally remembering her suit. "Is it done?" she muttered, her voice sloppy and slow. "Am I done now?"

"You're never done," Orleans laughed. "Haven't you been paying attention?"

She saw a figure, blurred but familiar.

"How do you feel, Quee Lee?"

Strange. Through and through, she felt very strange.

"That's normal enough," the voice offered. "Another couple months, and you'll be perfect. Have patience."

She was a patient person, she remembered. And now her eyes seemed to shut of their own volition, her mind sleeping again. But this time she dreamed, her and Perri and Orleans all at the beach together. She saw them sunning on the bone-white sand, and she even felt the heat of the false sun, felt it baking hot down to her rebuilt bones.

She woke, muttering, "Orleans? Orleans?"

"Here I am."

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Her vision was improved now. She found herself breathing normally, her wrong-shaped mouth struggling with each word and her suit managing an accurate translation.

"How do I look?" she asked.

Orleans smiled and said, "Lovely."

His face was blue-black, perhaps. When she sat up, looking at the plain gray locker room, she realized how the colors had shifted. Her new eyes perceived the world differently, sensitive to the same spectrum but in novel ways. She slowly climbed to her feet, then asked, "How long?"

"Nine months, fourteen days."

No, she wasn't finished. But the transformation had reached a stable point, she sensed, and it was wonderful to be mobile again. She managed a few tentative steps. She made clumsy fists with her too-thick hands. Lifting the fists, she gazed at them, wondering how they would look beneath the hyperfiber.

"Want to see yourself?" Orleans asked.

Now? Was she ready?

Her friend smiled, tusks glinting in the room's weak light. He offered a large mirror, and she bent to put her face close enough...finding a remade face staring up at her, a sloppy mouth full of mirror-colored teeth and a pair of hairy pits for eyes. She managed a deep breath and shivered. Her skin was lovely, golden or at least appearing golden to her. It was covered with hard white lumps, and her nose was a slender beak. She wished she could touch herself, hands stroking her faceplate. Only Remoras could never touch their own flesh....

"If you feel strong enough," he offered, "you can go with me. My crew and I are going on a patching mission, out to the prow."

"When?"

"Now, actually." He lowered the mirror. "The others are waiting in the shuttle. Stay here for a couple more days, or come now."

"Now," she whispered.

"Good." He nodded, telling her, "They want to meet you. They're curious what sort of person becomes a Remora."

A person who doesn't want to be locked up in a bland gray room, she thought to herself, smiling now with her mirrored teeth.

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They had all kinds of faces, all unique, myriad eyes and twisting mouths and flesh of every color. She counted fifteen Remoras, plus Orleans, and Quee Lee worked to learn names and get to know her new friends. The shuttle ride was like a party, a strange informal party, and she had never known happier people, listening to Remora jokes and how they teased one another, and how they sometimes teased her. In friendly ways, of course. They asked about her apartment — how big; how fancy; how much — and about her long life. Was it as boring as it sounded? Quee Lee laughed at herself while she nodded, saying, "No, nothing changes very much. The centuries have their way of running together, sure."

One Remora — a large masculine voice and a contorted blue face — asked the others, "Why do people pay fortunes to ride the ship, then do everything possible to hide deep inside it? Why don't they ever step outside and have a little look at where we're going?"

The cabin erupted in laughter, the observation an obvious favorite.

"Immortals are cowards," said the woman beside Quee Lee.

"Fools," said a second woman, the one with comma-shaped eyes. "Most of them, at least."

Quee Lee felt uneasy, but just temporarily. She turned and looked through a filthy window, the smooth changeless landscape below and the glowing sky as she remembered it. The view soothed her. Eventually she shut her eyes and slept, waking when Orleans shouted something about being close to their destination. "Decelerating now!" he called from the cockpit.

They were slowing. Dropping. Looking at her friends, she saw a variety of smiles meant for her. The Remoras beside her took her hands, everyone starting to pray. "No comets today," they begged. "And plenty tomorrow, because we want overtime."

The shuttle slowed to nothing, then settled.

Orleans strode back to Quee Lee, his mood suddenly serious. "Stay close," he warned, "but don't get in our way, either."

The hyperfiber was thickest here, on the prow, better than ten kilometers deep, and its surface had been browned by the ceaseless radiations. A soft dry dust clung to the lifesuits, and everything was lit up by the aurora and flashes of laser light. Quee Lee followed the others, listening to their chatter. She ate a little meal of Remoran soup — her first conscious meal — feeling the soup moving down her throat, trying to map her new architecture. Her

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stomach seemed the same, but did she have two hearts? It seemed that the beats were wrong. Two hearts nestled side by side. She found Orleans and approached him. "I wish I could pull off my suit, just once. Just for a minute." She told him, "I keep wondering how all of me looks."

Orleans glanced at her, then away. He said, "No."

"No?"

"Remoras don't remove their suits. Ever."

There was anger in the voice and a deep chilling silence from the others. Quee Lee looked about, then swallowed. "I'm not a Remora," she finally said. "I don't understand...."

Silence persisted, quick looks exchanged.

"I'm going to climb out of this...eventually...!"

"But don't say it now," Orleans warned. A softer, more tempered voice informed her, "We have taboos. Maybe we seem too rough to have them — "

"No," she muttered.

" —yet we do. These lifesuits are as much a part of our bodies as our guts and eyes, and being a Remora, a true Remora, is a sacred pledge that you take for your entire life."

The comma-eyed woman approached, saying, "It's an insult to remove your suit. A sacrilege."

"Contemptible," said someone else. "Or worse."

Then Orleans, perhaps guessing Quee Lee's thoughts, made a show of touching her, and she felt the hand through her suit. "Not that you're anything but our guest, of course. Of course." He paused, then said, "We have our beliefs, that's all."

"Ideals," said the woman.

"And contempt for those we don't like. Do you understand?"

She couldn't, but she made understanding sounds just the same. Obviously she had found a sore spot.

Then came a new silence, and she found herself marching through the dust, wishing someone would make angry sounds again. Silence was the worst kind of anger. From now on, she vowed, she would be careful about everything she said. Every word.

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THE CRATER was vast and rough and only partway patched. Previous crew had brought giant tanks and the machinery used to make the patch. It was something of an artform, pouring the fresh liquid hyperfiber and carefully curing it. Each shift added another hundred meters to the smooth crater floor. Orleans stood with Quee Lee at the top, explaining the job. This would be a double shift, and she was free to watch. "But not too closely," he warned her again, the tone vaguely parental. "Stay out of our way."

She promised. For that first half-day, she was happy to sit on the crater's lip, on a ridge of tortured and useless hyperfiber, imagining the comet that must have made this mess. Not large, she knew. A large one would have blasted a crater too big to see at a glance, and forty crews would be laboring here. But it hadn't been a small one, either. It must have slipped past the lasers, part of a swarm. She watched the red beams cutting across the sky, their heat producing new colors in the aurora. Her new eyes saw amazing details. Shock waves as violet phosphorescence; swirls of orange and crimson and snowy white. A beautiful deadly sky, wasn't it? Suddenly the lasers fired faster, a spiderweb of beams overhead, and she realized that a swarm was ahead of the ship, pinpointed by the navigators somewhere below them...tens of millions of kilometers ahead, mud and ice and rock closing fast...!

The lasers fired even faster, and she bowed her head.

There was an impact, at least one. She saw the flash and felt a faint rumble dampened by the hull, a portion of those energies absorbed and converted into useful power. Impacts were fuel, of a sort. And the residual gases would be concentrated and pumped inside, helping to replace the inevitable loss of volatiles as the ship continued on its great trek.

The ship was an organism feeding on the galaxy.

It was a familiar image, almost cliché, yet suddenly it seemed quite fresh. Even profound. Quee Lee laughed to herself, looking out over the browning plain while turning her attentions inward. She was aware of her breathing and the bump-bumping of wrong hearts, and she sensed changes with every little motion. Her body had an odd indecipherable quality. She could feel every fiber in her muscles, every twitch and every stillness. She had never been so alive, so self-aware, and she found herself laughing with a giddy amazement.

If she was a true Remora, she thought, then she would be a world unto

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herself. A world like the ship, only smaller, its organic parts enclosed in armor and forever in flux. Like the passengers below, the cells of her body were changing. She thought she could nearly feel herself evolving...and how did Orleans control it? It would be astonishing if she could re-evolve sight, for instance...gaining eyes unique to herself, never having existed before and never to exist again...!

What if she stayed with these people?

The possibility suddenly occurred to her, taking her by surprise.

What if she took whatever pledge was necessary, embracing all of their taboos and proving that she belonged with them? Did such things happen? Did adventurous passengers try converting — ?

The sky turned red, lasers firing and every red line aimed at a point directly overhead. The silent barrage was focused on some substantial chunk of ice and grit, vaporizing its surface and cracking its heart. Then the beams separated, assaulting the bigger pieces and then the smaller ones. It was an enormous drama, her exhilaration married to terror...her watching the aurora brightening as force fields killed the momentum of the surviving grit and atomic dust. The sky was a vivid orange, and sudden tiny impacts kicked up the dusts around her. Something struck her leg, a flash of light followed by a dim pain...and she wondered if she was dead, then how badly she was wounded. Then she blinked and saw the little crater etched above her knee. A blemish, if that. And suddenly the meteor shower was finished.

Quee Lee rose to her feet, shaking with nervous energy.

She began picking her way down the crater slope. Orleans' commands were forgotten; she needed to speak to him. She had insights and compliments to share, nearly tripping with her excitement, finally reaching the worksite and gasping, her air stale from her exertions. She could taste herself in her breaths, the flavor unfamiliar, thick and a little sweet.

"Orleans!" she cried out.

"You're not supposed to be here," groused one woman.

The comma-eyed woman said, "Stay right there. Orleans is coming, and don't move!"

A lake of fresh hyperfiber was cooling and curing as she stood beside it. A thin skin had formed, the surface utterly flat and silvery. Mirror-like. Quee Lee could see the sky reflected in it, leaning forward and knowing she shouldn't. She risked falling in order to see herself once again. The nearby

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Remoras watched her, saying nothing. They smiled as she grabbed a lump of old hyperfiber, positioning herself, and the lasers flashed again, making everything bright as day.

She didn't see her face.

Or rather, she did. But it wasn't the face she expected, the face from Orleans' convenient mirror. Here was the old Quee Lee, mouth ajar, those pretty and ordinary eyes opened wide in amazement.

She gasped, knowing everything. A near-fortune paid, and nothing in return. Nothing here had been real. This was an enormous and cruel sick joke; and now the Remoras were laughing, hands on their untouchable bellies and their awful faces contorted, ready to rip apart from the sheer brutal joy of the moment...!

"YOUR MIRROR wasn't a mirror, was it? It synthesized that image, didn't it?" She kept asking questions, not waiting for a response. "And you drugged me, didn't you? That's why everything still looks and feels wrong."

Orleans said, "Exactly. Yes."

Quee Lee remained inside her lifesuit, just the two of them flying back to Port Beta. He would see her on her way home. The rest of the crew was working, and Orleans would return and finish his shift. After her discovery, everyone agreed there was no point in keeping her on the prow.

"You owe me money," she managed.

Orleans' face remained blue-black. His tusks framed a calm icy smile. "Money? Whose money?"

"I paid you for a service, and you never met the terms."

"I don't know about any money," he laughed.

"I'll report you," she snapped, trying to use all of her venom. "I'll go to the captains — "

" — and embarrass yourself further." He was confident, even cocky. "Our transaction would be labeled illegal, not to mention disgusting. The captains will be thoroughly disgusted, believe me." Another laugh. "Besides, what can anyone prove? You gave someone your money, but nobody will trace it to any of us. Believe me."

She had never felt more ashamed, crossing her arms and trying to wish herself home again.

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"The drug will wear off soon," he promised. "You'll feel like yourself again. Don't worry."

Softly, in a breathless little voice, she asked, "How long have I been gone?"

Silence.

"It hasn't been months, has it?"

"More like three days." A nod inside the helmet. "The same drug distorts your sense of time, if you get enough of it."

She felt ill to her stomach.

"You'll be back home in no time, Quee Lee."

She was shaking and holding herself.

The Remora glanced at her for a long moment, something resembling remorse in his expression. Or was she misreading the signs?

"You aren't spiritual people," she snapped. It was the best insult she could manage, and she spoke with certainty. "You're crude, disgusting monsters. You couldn't live below if you had the chance, and this is where you belong."

Orleans said nothing, merely watching her.

Finally he looked ahead, gazing at the endless gray landscape. "We try to follow our founder's path. We try to be spiritual." A shrug. "Some of us do better than others, of course. We're only human."

She whispered, "Why?"

Again he looked at her, asking, "Why what?"

"Why have you done this to me?"

Orleans seemed to breathe and hold the breath, finally exhaling. "Oh, Quee Lee," he said, "you haven't been paying attention, have you?"

What did he mean?

He grasped her helmet, pulling her face up next to his face. She saw nothing but the eyes, each black hair moving and nameless fluids circulating through them, and she heard the voice saying, "This has never, never been about you, Quee Lee. Not you. Not for one instant."

And she understood — perhaps she had always known — struck mute and her skin going cold, and finally, after everything, she found herself starting to weep.

Perri was already home, by chance.

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"I was worried about you," he confessed, sitting in the garden room with honest relief on his face. "The apartment said you were going to be gone for a year or more. I was scared for you."

"Well," she said, "I'm back."

Her husband tried not to appear suspicious, and he worked hard not to ask certain questions. She could see him holding the questions inside himself. She watched him decide to try the old charm, smiling now and saying, "So you went exploring?"

"Not really."

"Where?"

"Cloud Canyon," she lied. She had practiced the lie all the way from Port Beta, yet it sounded false now. She was halfway startled when her husband said:

"Did you go into it?"

"Partway, then I decided not to risk it. I rented a boat, but I couldn't make myself step on board."

Perri grinned happily, unable to hide his relief. A deep breath was exhaled, then he said, "By the way, I've raised almost eight thousand credits already. I've already put them in your account."

"Fine."

"I'll find the rest too."

"It can wait," she offered.

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Relief blended into confusion. "Are you all right, darling?"

"I'm tired," she allowed.

"You look tired."

"Let's go to bed, shall we?"

Perri was compliant, making love to her and falling into a deep sleep, as exhausted as Quee Lee. But she insisted on staying awake, sliding into her private bathroom and giving her autodoc a drop of Perri's seed. "I want to know if there's anything odd," she told it.

"Yes, miss."

"And scan him, will you? Without waking him."

The machine set to work. Almost instantly, Quee Lee was being shown lists of abnormal genes and vestigial organs. She didn't bother to read them. She closed her eyes, remembering what little Orleans had told her after he had admitted that she wasn't anything more than an incidental bystander. "Perri was born Remora, and he left us. A long time ago, by our count, and that's a huge taboo."

"Leaving the fold?" she had said.

"Every so often, one of us visits his home while he's gone. We slip a little dust into our joints, making them grind, and we do a pity-play to whomever we find."

Her husband had lied to her from the first, about everything.

"Sometimes we'll trick her into giving even more money," he had

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boasted. "Just like we've done with you."

And she had asked, "Why?"

"Why do you think?" he had responded.

Vengeance, of a sort. Of course.

"Eventually," Orleans had declared, "everyone's going to know about Perri. He'll run out of hiding places, and money, and he'll have to come back to us. We just don't want it to happen too soon, you know? It's too much fun as it is."

Now she opened her eyes, gazing at the lists of abnormalities. It had to be work for him to appear human, to cope with those weird Remora genetics. He wasn't merely someone who had lived on the hull for a few years, no. He was a full-blooded Remora who had done the unthinkable, removing his suit and living below, safe from the mortal dangers of the universe. Quee Lee was the latest of his ignorant lovers, and she knew precisely why he had selected her. More than money, she had offered him a useful naiveté and a sheltered ignorance...and wasn't she well within her rights to confront him, confront him and demand that he leave at once...?

"Erase the lists," she said.

"Yes, miss."

She told her apartment, "Project the view from the prow, if you will. Put it on my bedroom ceiling, please."

"Of course, miss," it replied.

She stepped out of the bathroom, lasers and exploding comets overhead. She fully expected to do what Orleans anticipated, putting her mistakes behind her. She sat on the edge of her bed, on Perri's side, waiting for him to wake on his own. He would feel her gaze and open his eyes, seeing her framed by a Remoran sky....

...and she hesitated, taking a breath and holding it, glancing upwards, remembering that moment on the crater's lip when she had felt a union with her body. A perfection; an intoxicating sense of self. It was induced by drugs and ignorance, yet still it had seemed true. It was a perception worth any cost, she realized; and she imagined Perri's future, hounded by the Remoras, losing every human friend, left with no choice but the hull and his left-behind life....

She looked at him, the peaceful face stirring.

Compassion. Pity. Not love, but there was something not far from love making her feel for the fallen Remora.

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"What if...?" she whispered, beginning to smile.

And Perri smiled in turn, eyes closed and him enjoying some lazy dream that in an instant he would surely forget.

"Perhaps we should declare we have an illegal alien before someone notices."

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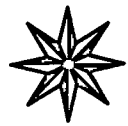

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THOSE LAZY, hazy, crazy days of summer are inching closer and closer. As the sunlight hours increase, so do your chances of reading in the great outdoors. We plan to provide lots of great stories to keep you supplied during the summer months.

Our June issue has a wonderful cover story by **Allen Steele**. "Shepherd Moon" is an off-world sf piece about art and artists that will surprise and please you. Allen, who has been called this generation's answer to Robert Heinlein, never fails to deliver.

Nebula Award Winner **James Morrow** returns to our pages with another of his popular Bible Stories for Adults. This one, subtitled "The Tower," takes a new interpretation on the Tower of Babel. The setting is present day New York City when God takes up residence at a very famous gaudy gold building, also known as a tower....

And, since our June issue arrives in subscriber's mailboxes before May first, we thought we would add a Mother's Day story. Alaskan novelist **Michael Armstrong,** whose rare short stories have appeared in *F&SF*, writes a sweet sf story about a mother who is trying to protect her gifted child. "Mother to Elves" will make you look at all children — and their mothers — in a new light.

Of course, **John Kessel** will return with more words of wisdom on books, as will **Charles de Lint**. We will have a science column from **Gregory Benford**, and several other new and delightful short stories will round out the issue.

In future magazines, **Richard Bowes** will return with more urban fantasy, **Jack McDevitt** will provide some hard sf, and **Nina Kiriki Hoffman** will add chilling horror fiction. **Esther M. Friesner, George Alec Effinger**, and **Jerry Oltion** will contribute a lighter touch. Our cover stories will include pieces by **Elizabeth Hand, Mike Resnick**, and **Michael Coney**. So, when you plan your summer vacation, be sure to put F&SF in your suitcase. You wouldn't want to miss an issue.

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YOU CAN ACCELERATE ALMOST ANYTHING, BUT DR. QUARK GOES AT HIS OWN PACE.
I DECIDED TO ACCELERATE SOME RADISHES AT THE SUPERCOLLIDER.
THE RESULTS WERE SPECTACULAR—THE RADISHE COLLIDED, AND CREATED AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF ENERGY—AND INGREDIENTS FOR INNUMERABLE TINY SALADS.
NEEDLESS TO SAY, I TOOK EXTENSIVE NOTES...
...AND WROTE A LONG ARTICLE.
BUT I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO SLANT THE PIECE.*
*WRITERS' AND PUBLISHERS' LINGO
WAS IT FOR 'ACCELERATOR JOURNAL' OR
RADISH NEWS
OR 'BREAKTHROUGHS IN ENERGY SOURCES & OTHER PASTIMES'
I COULDN'T EAT, I COULDN'T SLEEP.
I COULDN'T EVEN ACCELERATE.
WHILE BROWSING AT THE NEWSSTAND, MY PROBLEM WAS SOLVED.
I'LL HAVE THE LEAD ARTICLE IN NEXT MONTH'S 'JOURNAL OF INDECISIVENESS'.
S. Hyers

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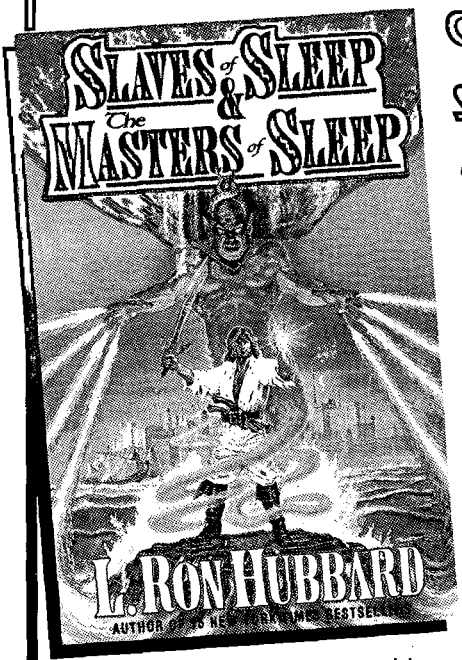
When evil strikes, Jan's only chance to survive lies in another world.



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